Calling to Complain:

An Ethnographic and Conversation Analytic Account of Complaints to an Industry

Ombudsman.

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Abstract

Although the term complaining represents an ostensibly straightforward behaviour, it has come to obtain a range of meanings within academic and commercial works which have directed research toward understanding the behaviour and attempting to improve the way that it is undertaken, particularly in commercial environments where complaint handling constitutes an important field of commercial practice for many firms. It is proposed in this thesis that such variation in the way that complaining is approached is problematic, as it is treated ways that frequently underemphasise the fundamental point that it is overwhelmingly conducted in interpersonal interactions using language as its primary vehicle (Edwards, 2005). This thesis offers an approach to complaint handling and complaining that eschews such approaches in favour of an empirically grounded account based on the principles of ethnographic analysis, conversation analysis, and discursive psychology. Through investigating the complaint handling procedures as practiced by employees in an institution expressly dedicated to the receipt of complaints and enquiries from customers by employing participant observation and interviews, an account of complaint handling is developed that identifies how a range of forces works to impact on the way that it is performed in an institutional environment, furnishing complaint handling with a level of detail not currently offered in managerial literature dedicated to developing the practice. Next, two research chapters present the investigation of two different aspects of complaint interactions themselves. The first of these focuses on call openings as customers and institutional agents work to align themselves to the project of the call, demonstrating varying orientations to institutional complaining as callers demonstrate their own procedures for complaining (and enquiring) which may not match the institutional prerogatives and procedures of the agents receiving the calls. The final research chapter offers an analysis of a recurrent practice in the complaint calls themselves: callers' use of self-disclosure in the service of rendering matters as problematic and warranting complaint. This finding adds to existing discursive understandings of how complaining is done. Taken together the findings offer an alternative approach to investigating complaint handling by treating it as an indexical practice bound to local demands. This offers a detailed depiction of complaint handling and complaining 'in situ' that may offer researchers and commercial entities a new approach to investigating how it is that complaining is done and how, in commercial or institutional contexts, complaint handling may be improved through the methods employed in the thesis.

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Introduction

For this is not the liberty that we can hope, that
no grievance ever should arise in the
Commonwealth, that let no man in this world
expect; but when complaints are freely heard,
deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is
the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise
men look for ~ Areopagitica, Milton, 1644.

Areopagitica, Milton's piece of prose polemic that decried and agitated against literary censorship, predates the research presented here by four centuries, yet this extract illustrates that the ideas of 'freely heard' complaints, and their importance to 'civil liberty' and reform were as alive then as they are now. In contemporary Western society Milton's grievance has been largely addressed. A host of developments have ensured that today, in the main, one's freedom to voice dissatisfaction is ensured. Indeed, Milton's insight into the centrality of this assurance to civil existence and its utility in improving that existence has been borne out, evidenced by it being made focal in a raft of legislation; assurances of freedom of expression are core to several constitutions and much fundamental state legislation internationally. In addition, institutions—known in Australia and New Zealand as Ombudsmen—have been established for the explicit purpose of investigating the complaints of citizens against official public institutions and organisations, and holding these institutions and organizations to account.

Its residence in the various pantheons of states' civic rights aside, complaining has also found currency in commercial and industrial arenas. Today it is rare to find any significant commercial entity that operates without mechanisms in place for 'complaint handling': the tasks of processing and addressing customer complaints. Indeed such customer services wings of modern enterprises are viewed as an integral public interface, and a key method of obtaining 'feedback' from a consumer market in order to sustain and enhance a firms' position within it (Plymire, 1991). A weighty body of commercially-oriented literature has accumulated that addresses the topic, developing ideas such as 'Customer Relationship Marketing' and bearing titles like 'Delivering Knock-Your-Socks-Off Service' (Zernke & Anderson, 1998). The practical reality of

the commercial customer service manifestos and bowed library shelves is that a significant number of people are now employed to perform the task(s) of customer service, a significant part of which is complaint handling. Complaints have become a source of employment. And the prospects in this field seem to be trending ever upward; consumer focused media-producing groups, particularly Consumer New Zealand and the 'Choice' wing of the Australian Consumer Association, view individual complaints as positive behaviours necessary for the operation of fair and efficient economic markets, and encourage them accordingly.

These commercial and regulatory functions of complaining have occurred as part of a broader shift in discourse and policy around individual participation in society—the economically rational, decision-making consumer is the reigning paradigm *du jour*, where individuals consume products, services, information, and perform behaviours that both shape and respond to 'markets' (Ryan, 2001). Complaining is one of these behaviours, and it has become integral to two prominent systems of human organisation in the Western world: representative democracy and the market economy (Ryan, 2001). And since the advent of industrial privatisation in Australia and New Zealand, when these two institutions became entwined, complaining has come to the fore as one approach towards regulating these newly-competitive industries such that the checks and balances – the accountability that existed with state control – remains despite the transferral of industrial control and operations to private, corporate concerns[1]. This complaints-as-regulation approach has occurred with the establishment of ombudsmen for privatized industries. These semi-public[2] offices represent an institutional solution to the challenges of public responsibility and liability that followed privatisation: a link of accountability between the public, their legislating executive, and the commercial entities operating in a particular market. Ombudsmen's offices deal almost exclusively in complaints (and it is from one of these organisations that the data for the current thesis originates); complaints are the core substance that ombudsmen use to regulate industry; to ensure that rules and guidelines are being adhered to; to ensure that commercial entities are answerable to public consumers in the market. So powerful

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[1] Privatisation, the sale or transferral of state-owned industrial assets to corporate entities, has been a contentious and complex practice, as has been the establishment of regulatory controls over privatised industries, and this is discussed in more limpid detail in the ethnographic investigation chapter.

[2] The majority of privatised industry ombudsmen are structured such that representation is made for the public and for commercial participants in the particular sector. This is achieved by having both commercial and consumer representatives on the Board of Directors. While a consistent rule, this applies to the industry and materials examined in this thesis.

but ostensibly abstract notions, notions like 'regulation' or 'civic responsibility', in fact have, in complaining, a tangible, observable, and ineluctably human origin.

Yet this is only one side of the coin, interpretations of the behaviour that offer ways of valuing or categorizing complaining. Of course with such scaffolding removed, complaining is essentially an individual and interpersonal phenomenon. And like so many interpersonal behaviours, complaining is value-laden: it has a particular currency at the individual, interpersonal, and perhaps more broadly, socio-cultural levels. Evidence that complaining can be negatively valued by members of a cultural or social group is substantiated through language, with terms such as 'moaner', 'whiner', and the Australasian idiosyncrasy 'sook' (Edwards, 2005). These terms are derogatory, and have persons prone to excessive complaints as their referents. In Britain, the individual trait of 'keeping a stiff upper lip' and maintaining stoicism in the face of adversity instead of expressing one's dissatisfaction is valued as a core aspect of an embodied national identity. A similarly valued trait may is referred to in the New Zealand and Australian descriptive term of 'hardness': resolute, silent toughness in harsh (particularly physical) conditions, while the antonymous 'softness' refers to the absence of such stoicism in the face of adversity. Complaining is also associated with childishness. An unreasonable complaint is referenced in the idiom 'throwing one's toys'; a complainer may be a 'crybaby'. Complainers, and the act of complaining, can be subject to derision, while the act of maintaining stoic silence may be respected and celebrated.

Positive aspects of complaints are also identifiable at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. For example venting, and its idiomatic expression 'blowing off steam', describes a positive aspect of negative expressions, whereby private 'pent-up' negative emotions are cathartically 'released' from the individual through their public communication, providing that individual with some form of psychic relief (Nyer, 2000). Interpersonally, 'constructive criticism' is negative information communicated to a target with a view to somehow improving that target, another ostensibly positive dimension for this behaviour. At the individual level, then, the position of complaints appears to be mixed. Although protected by legislation, valued by business, a source of employment, and relied upon by both the informal and formal regulators of commercial markets, complaints are still a delicate interpersonal business, one that although potentially positive, still holds powerful negative connotations at the social level. And this is the current dilemma. Research on customer service work frequently tenders the

proposition that such interaction-centred work exploits 'emotional labour' in charged encounters where 'complaints as feedback', 'complaints as regulation', and consumer behaviour come a distant second to the actual moment of the complaint, where a host of negative behaviours and emotions ostensibly reign. To speak plainly, on the one hand complaints are posited to have a host of beneficial functions and are required in organisational systems. On the other, they are described as emotionally charged, taxing, aversive interactional events. At some point, these apparently competing paradigms must occur as an observable, experienced event.

The research presented here is about that 'social experience' of complaints. While a significant body of research exists on complaining (to be reviewed forthwith), little of this is concentrated on examples of actual complaints occurring in 'real time', particularly with regard to commercial or institutional complaining. While the legislative, commercial and socio-cultural forces mentioned above represent powerful networks and arrangements for categorizing and describing complaining as an activity, it is also the case that complaints, before they become statistically analysable categorical data or policy feedback, are oftentimes done through conversation between some set of speaking, interacting individuals. It is the fundamental underpinning of this thesis that understanding this level of complaining is important and can help to inform existing understandings. Additionally, because the vast majority of complaint handling and customer service involves human interaction and conversation, it seems that such an analysis, and the development of analytic tools *for* such an analysis, would be of great utility both to this industry and to understanding complaining as a human behaviour in general.

The research outlined here is about that analysis. It is based on an ethnographic investigation of an ombudsman's office and the way that complaint handling is performed there, and on interactions between agents of this institution and complaining customers. Chapter two offers a review of the extant academic literature directed toward understanding complaining. Broadly speaking, the majority of complaining research derives from three fields; consumer marketing and service research, social psychological research, and discursively oriented research using conversation analysis. Relevant literature from these fields is presented, and following this, a methodology section introduces the analytic approaches employed by the present study. Chapter three provides an investigation into the specific institution in which the interactions occur. This chapter, informed by ethnographic research methodologies, offers an observational

and descriptive account of the institution in which the analysed complaints occur. It introduces its employees, and lets them speak through interview data about their work and the complaints they handle. The goal is to furnish an empirical understanding of complaint handling as a form of professional labour embedded in a particular institutional context. Chapter four sees the commencement of the discursive analysis of complaints-in-interaction. Through an investigation into the structure of the openings of calls between callers and institutional agents, it reveals the interplay between individual callers' orientations to complaining and the bureaucratic institutional processes for receiving them. Chapter five looks to develop existing discursive understandings of how complaining is done by imparting an analysis of callers' self-disclosures during the delivery of their complaints. Specifically, it analyses particular practices speakers use to refer to the 'self' when they offer narratives regarding the problematic matter they have contacted the institution about, and interprets this in light of the concepts of self-disclosure and self-presentation. Chapter six offers a discussion and concluding remarks, and attempts to portray how the conclusions and the methodologies utilised in this study may potentially be amalgamated with existing approaches toward complaining in order to form more robust accounts for it, both academically and commercially.

Overall then the fundamental research goal is to offer an empirical account of complaining that incorporates both a particular commercial/institutional 'version' of the practice and individual 'versions': an attempt at investigating and understanding complaining as it is accomplished as an interactional event within a particular institutional context. There are three key research questions:

How is complaint handling understood and performed in a *particular institutional context* by professional agents of that institution?

How do institutional understandings and approaches to complaint-handling map with individual (caller) complaint orientations as demonstrated through call openings?

How do callers use self-disclosure in their complaint narratives, and what are the outcomes of this in conversation?

Chapter One
Reviewing Complaining: Approaches in Psychology

The behaviour of complaining has received analytic attention from three fields of enquiry: Social psychology, consumer and marketing research, and discursive psychology employing conversation analysis. Related to the discursive approach have been investigations hailing from the field of pragmatics. The academic interest in complaining has occurred alongside, and often responsively to, interest in complaints as commercial events occurring between firms and consumers and, more recently, complaints as a form of market regulation; with the adoption of the consumer as the paradigm du jour of the individual participant in society, and the rise of *homo economicus* in social theory, complaints have been positioned as a rational human action open to organisation and categorisation (Kowalski, 1996). In both the corporate world and the politico-social world complaints are corralled and organised to perform particular tasks, be that feedback on products and services, data for marketing departments, or the regulation of an entire commercial market. This review assesses the principal findings from those three academic fields and also from research into the way complaints feature in the world of work.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Complaints:
Establishing a Definition

> **complain** /kəm'pleɪn/ *v. & n.* LME. [(O)Fr. *Complaign-* pres. Stem of *complaindre,* f. Proto-Romance (med.L) *complagere.* F. L COM- + *plangere* lament: cf. PLAIN *v.*] **A** *v.* † **1** *v.t.* Bewail, lament: LME-EI8. † **2** *v.i & refl.* Give expression to sorrow. LME-M17. **3** *v.i.* & † *refl.* Express dissatisfaction. (Foll. By *about,* (arch.) *against, at, of, that* † (up)on.) LME. **B** Make a formal statement of a grievance; lodge a complaint, bring a charge. LME. † **4** *v.t.* Express dissatisfaction with. Only in 16. **5** *v.i.* & † *refl.* Suffer physically, be unwell. *obs.* Exc. *dial.* E17. **6** *v.i. tranf. & fig.* emit a mournful sound; (of a mast, rudder, etc) groan, creak. L17. (The Shorter Oxford, 1993, p. 459.)

Existing definitions of complaining vary between research areas and methodologies, as researchers develop conceptualizations of complaining that emphasise aspects relevant to their own epistemic communities and target audiences. From the perspective of social psychology, complaining refers to an expressive behaviour whereby dissatisfaction is articulated to some target(s) (Alicke et al., 1992, Kowalski, 1996). This is a distinct process from its more cognitively oriented

theoretical precursor, the internal experience of dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 1996) which will be dealt with in the next section on causation. The social psychological approach concerns itself primarily with the causes and outcomes of complaints as opposed to the behaviour itself, although Alicke et al. (1992) provide an inventory of eight 'major categories' of complaints which head 45 subcategories, ranging from complaints about attitudes to school through to failed obligations to the self, and Kowalski notes that articulated complaints may be expressive or instrumental in nature (1996; 2002).

Consumer-oriented literature concurs with the basic definition of complaints as the expression of dissatisfaction although it isolates this into dissatisfaction with consumer episodes (products and services exchanged in commercial encounters) and the expressive component into consumer action (e.g Landon, 1980). Importantly, the consumer literature goes further than that of social psychology in determining the specific consumer actions that 'do' the complaining and accepts that the behaviour adopts various forms. The most robust example from this literature has been Singh's (1988) proposition that complaining can occur as *Voice* (complaining directly to a commercial source of dissatisfaction)[1], *Private* (negative 'Word of Mouth' to social acquaintances) and *Third-Party* (complaining to a service dedicated to consumer dissatisfaction). Despite this and more recent taxonomies of the immediate behaviour, both social and consumer psychology have tended to focus on the dissatisfaction/satisfaction half of the paradigm, foregoing the actual 'whatness' of complaints themselves in favour of process-accounts identifying causative variables and outcomes for firms and individuals. Such 'whatness' research has arisen largely from researchers allied to discursive psychology and pragmatics, who advocate an alternative conceptualisation of complaining: Edwards (2005) argues that complaints "elude formal definition" (p. 7) and are best understood as a normative category with recurrent features that people recognise (that they are *negative*, that they involve some *grievance*, that *agency* and *culpability* are involved) and roles that are adopted (a *complainer*, a complaint *object*, a *recipient*). This is similar to Emerson and Messenger's earlier (1977) conceptualisation of the 'micro-politics of trouble'. Here roles of victim, transgressor, and trouble-shooter are invoked that work on the source of the trouble. Pragmatics researchers have focused on complaining as a speech-act. For example, Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) identify five 'strategies' of complaining, each with

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[1] 'Voice' within the consumer literature refers to direct (consumer to firm) complaining. This is distinct from the conceptualisation of voice within Organisational Psychology, where the notion is akin to that of 'feedback', i.e critical but with the intention of improvement (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998).

varying semantic features or 'formulas' that complainers may use in the production of a complaint. Similarly LaForest (2002) identifies six 'complaint realisation patterns' in interaction. Such research, oriented as it is toward language and its situated occurrence in interaction, offers an analytic approach to complaining that may provide the missing descriptive piece of the model presented by social and consumer psychological research, namely: what does the behaviour sound like? What, when complaining, do people actually *do?*

These definitional approaches all vary. The clearest variation is in what may be treated as a complaint. For the discursive and pragmatics researchers, it is the expression itself, the actual articulation and its occurrence in situated interaction that warrants the analytic treatment and may be formally identified as the behaviour in question. On the other side, social and consumer psychology researchers consider the behaviour as one situated not in an immediate interaction, but rather in a series of contingent stages incorporating both private cognitive variables and interpersonal factors. They consider factors motivating the complaint, orientations toward its potential outcomes, and attempt to categorise it by type, for example 'voice' as a direct complaint to a transgressing commercial entity. It is apparent then that presently within psychological research there is no one strict definition of complaining. It may not be delineated from the analytic stances adopted by researchers and the tools they use to do their work. Instead there is agreement only on ingredients that constitute a complaint; it consists of an observable product (an interaction, a written form); which will occur in some situation (a conversation with an acquaintance, at a customer services helpdesk); will have or claim some motivation (dissatisfaction with a product, an instrumental goal of compensation); and will have some outcome (psychic relief through venting, some response or kind of uptake from a recipient). I propose to return to the issue of the definition in the conclusion of this review where I propose an informed analytic perspective on the matter. Now, I turn to a brief review these ingredients of complaining, beginning with research regarding its causal origins.

Motivations and Motives: Causes of Complaints.

dissatisfaction / ˌdɪ(s)atɪsˈfakʃ(ə)n, dɪˌsat-/ *n.* M17. [f. DIS- 2 + SATISAFACTION] **1** The fact or condition of being dissatisfied. **2** In *pl.* Feelings or expressions of discontent. M17. The Shorter Oxford, 1993, p. 702.

For researchers concerned with complaining the experience of dissatisfaction is regarded as the critical causal variable in any complaint episode. The trouble source, or problem, and the complaint itself are tightly integrated. Research is therefore directed to the origins of dissatisfaction itself. For Kowalski (1996; 2002) dissatisfaction begins with a state of self-focused attention where evaluations are made between actualities and standards, or personal criteria for those actualities. Discrepancies that may result from such evaluations lead to the experience of negative affect – dissatisfaction. Such evaluations may target the evaluator themselves, other people, or situations; they may refer to categories such as health; the conduct of others; or the weather. Through the broad applicability of the discrepancy-identification process the social psychological conceptualisation of dissatisfaction in the complaining context covers a theoretically infinite realm of sources. This identification of discrepancies, or inconsistent cognitions, has had a robust presence in social psychological research which has consistently related it to negative affect and psychological pathologies, for example Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory and Festinger's influential (1957) Dissonance Theory, while self-focused attention also has been implicated as causal to the experience of negative affect and related disorders (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Hamilton & Nix, 1991). Dissatisfaction, then, is the result of an individual identifying discrepancies, and it is characterised chiefly by the experience of negative affect. Progressing along the causal chain within the social psychological model, its link to complaining is mediated by a decision making process whereby the individual weighs the gains against the costs of actually complaining (Kowalski, 1996; Huppertz, 2007) in terms of the alleviation of that negative affect[1], a utility-oriented decision making paradigm that, with respect to complaining, originated in consumer research (Day, 1984).

Consumer psychology has adopted a similar conceptual approach to dissatisfaction albeit in a more focused manner. Dissatisfaction is the result of a perceived discrepancy between an actual *product* or *service* and individuals' standards or expectations, the source of the dissatisfaction then is limited to the realm of commercial transactions – an event dubbed 'service failure' (Oliver, 1997). Despite this more focused approach this body of research employs a diverse range of theoretical paradigms such as Equity Theory and Disconfirmation Theory (e.g Oliver, 1980; Oliver & Swan, 1989) in the pursuit of refined understandings regarding the 'post-purchase satisfaction response'. Regarding the causal link between experienced dissatisfaction

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[1] Although this is not an exclusive cause. The relationship between individual goal orientations and complaining will be discussed below.

and actually complaining, the consumer psychology literature is replete with a veritable smorgasbord of explanatory factors that refine the notion of the costs/gains decision-making paradigm in Kowalski's (1996) model. Principally these findings cluster as person-level factors and situation-level factors. That is, criteria of theoretical influence which may reside within consumers, or outside them in the form of specific material events or conditions. This research has yielded constructs such as the 'attitude to complaining'. Individuals with positive attitudes are more likely to complain than those who report less positive attitudes (Singh & Wilkes, 1996; Thogersen, Juhl, & Poulsen 2009; Fox, 2008). Individual personality factors additionally attenuate the dissatisfaction – complaining link. Those high in extraversion and assertiveness are more likely to complain (Kowalski, 1996), while individuals with an internal locus of control are more likely to complain than those with a more external locus of control (Gursoy, McCleary, & Lepsito, 2007). Learning too is implicated: Those with greater experience with complaining are more likely to complain than those less experienced (Kim, Kim, Im & Shin, 2003).

 In terms of material, or situational criteria, the greater the magnitude of the dissatisfaction then the greater the likelihood of complaining (Maute & Forrester, 1993), while dissatisfied consumers who perceive that a firm is receptive to complaining are more likely to complain, as are consumers who perceive lenient redress policies (Voorhees & Brady, 2005; Huppertz, 2007). The causal link between dissatisfaction and complaining then is a highly variable one, dependent on an extensive range of possible factors; so extensive that the 'complaining consumer' construct has obtained a level of academic complexity regarding driving variables that possibly renders it difficult to apply in work settings where the actual business of complaining is done. Furthering this complexity has been acknowledgement that dissatisfaction may not be the sole driver of complaining, and that individuals and consumers may perform the behaviour in the service of attaining particular goals.

Both Consumer and Social Psychological research into complaining have explored this additional motivational factor of complaints. Complaining as a goal oriented activity was first investigated as a strategy of self-presentation in the research of Schlenker (1980) where individuals theoretically complain to convey or claim some socially desirable identity (see also Jones & Pittman, 1982). Perhaps the best-known example of goal-oriented complaining is the phenomenon of venting or catharsis: Ridding oneself of some cognitive burden or negative affect through complaining

(Alicke et al., 1992, Nyer, 2000), a notion related to the health benefits of talking through issues or forming narratives about events in psychotherapy (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Stiles, Honos-Webb & Lani, 1999). In their study of everyday complaining in a university sample Alicke et al. found that venting was the most frequently identified reason for complaining by their respondents (1992). In this sense complaining as a goal-related activity seamlessly maps onto alleviating dissatisfaction, potentially offering a hermetic seal to the dissatisfaction process-account, however evidence for different goals has precluded such a convenience on this score. Consumer research has shown that instrumental goals of 'redress seeking', most commonly instantiated in the forms of refunds and replacements, can drive complaining by increasing consumers' perceived value of the complaint. (Singh, 1988; Kim et al., 2003). Goals, be they instrumental, interpersonal, or intrapersonal must be considered beside dissatisfaction as possible causal variables in a complaint.

What about the work of the discursive researchers? How have they approached the issue of causation? This research has left the matter of causation as a concern solely for the members of an interaction where the complaint is being performed. Causation is only identifiable, and indeed only relevant to the complaint itself, when the matter arises explicitly in interaction. In this way complaints are considered to constitute the source of the trouble itself (Emerson & Messinger, 1977). Causation is something claimed in conversation, and is bound to speakers' own identifications of the source of their trouble. Nonetheless some results evince support for aspects of the causal nexus above. Vásquez (2009) coded the pragmatic strategies deployed by individuals writing complaints on an online website, *TripAdvisor.* She found that nearly a third juxtaposed complainers' expectations with the complainable matter itself, related to the hypothesis above that dissatisfaction (and therefore complaining) is related directly to a discrepancy between standards and actualities. Relatedly, Drew (1998) suggests that in formulating their complaints people work to attribute blame on transgressors by forming 'normative standards' and explicating how they have been violated. Discursive research has found some support, then, for aspects of the causal notion of discrepancies in rendering dissatisfaction and leading to complaining. There is little support for other variables however. Of particular pertinence has been Edward's view that:

> "Given that a complaint involves some kind of *grievance,* this immediately makes relevant something that a speaker may work to minimise, which is any kind of motivated or dispositional basis for what they are saying" (2005, p. 7).

For all the intricate modelling reviewed above and the positing of ostensibly stable internal variables including personality constructs and attitudes, these in fact appear to be not only disregarded in complaints themselves, but actively *worked against* by individual complainers. This indicates an inter-disciplinary contretemps arising from what complaining actually *is* – either a complex and variable series of processes leading to a complaint, or an actual expressive act, in and of itself a complaint – and what may be considered the causes of this. To illuminate this further I move now to a review of literature that has focused on manifestly observable complaining, which is the focus of the empirical work of this thesis.

Complaining as a Mundane Interactional Activity

Primarily complaining occurs not in experimental scenarios or behavioural surveys, but interpersonally. It involves multiple parties – at the minimum a dyad of a complainer and a recipient – and, foregoing for the moment the tributaries of gesture and facial displays, its primary vehicle is language. Through this, previously privately experienced troubles are cast into the public domain (Emerson & Mesinger, 1977). Through this the 'expression of dissatisfaction' is accomplished and the outcomes, be they catharsis, financial compensation or otherwise, brought about. These details highlight an important and potentially consequential feature of the behaviour; that it occurs as an act of communication between some interacting individuals in particular situations. Discursive and to a lesser extent pragmatics researchers have relied on the method of Conversation Analysis (CA) in their analyses, in addition to Speech Act Theory and Discourse Analysis. CA is also the critical methodology of this thesis, and its use will be discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter. For now it is sufficient to note that CA regards conversation and interaction as largely constitutive of social phenomena. Working with naturally occurring, un-elicited talk as data, and relying on established normative practices in interaction such as turn-taking and speaker practices like repair and lexical choice, these researchers explicate how these phenomena are 'built up' and realised in interaction between participants. The major findings of this research concerning complaints are now discussed.

A Structure of Complaining

A foundational principle of CA is that social activity is done through sequential *turns at talk* where speakers collaboratively and incrementally construct 'action'. This

frequently results in researchers empirically identifying recurrent patterns, or normative structures of action. As a simple example, the social action of a greeting normatively involves two speakers producing two turns, one after the other, where each speaker proffers some greeting token. This *one-two*, or *first-second*, pattern in interaction is an example of an 'adjacency pair', the building blocks of sequential action in conversation (Schegloff, 2007). Related to complaining, in her analysis of 'Troubles-Talk' in interaction Jefferson (1988) considered a "standard order of occurrence" (p. 418) that represented a normative structure of action for people talking about their troubles. From her corpus Jefferson identified several (six) stages or sequences of talk involved in troubles talk, yet found that in no single case did these all occur, in a serial manner, together. Of importance was her evidence for an extraordinary sensitivity that commonly served to send this sequential structure of troubles-talk awry. Firstly Jefferson noted that introducing talk about a trouble into conversation is an accomplishment in itself involving repeated stages where the recipient of the troubles-talk is required to take up the topic. Secondly, where a trouble was able to be produced it was apparent that should recipients to that trouble not *affiliate*[1] with the stance of the speaker, then the troubles-talk tended to sputter and stall (Jefferson, 1988). This highlights that the production of complaints (complaining) is contingent on *all* parties to the conversation, not just the aggrieved complainant, and that this is highly consequential for how complaining is actually done.

Jefferson's consideration of troubles-talk as a structured 'big package' has since been adjusted to a more flexible normative form of organisation that eschews rigidly structured types of turns or sequences in favour of considering complaining as a broadly recognizable social action in talk. Structurally complaints are considered 'bounded sequences' (Drew, 1998) where the complaint is a *distinct topic* (as opposed to distinct series of sequences), introduced by a turn that initiates this topicalisation (an announcement, or a story-telling preface), and closed off by a noticeable transition to a different topic. The complaint proper, or explicit complaint, occurs *within* this sequence, and occurs following initial work that prepares the ground for the actual delivery of that complaint (Curl & Drew, 2009). Primarily the talk of complainants within these sequences is identifiable as story-telling, or narrative, that is also designed to provision the recipient with opportunities to affiliate with or endorse the activity in the form of

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[1] *Affiliation* refers to a hearer of some turn at talk providing their own turn which agrees with whatever *stance* the previous speaker has adopted. This is contrastive with *alignment*, where the hearer accepts or endorses the conversational *activity* of the speaker. So 'yes I agree' (with some assessment) is affiliative, while 'go on' (after the same assessment) aligns with some 'telling' activity (Stivers, 2008).

their own assessments or continuers (Drew, 1998; Curl & Drew, 2009; Vásquez, 2011). This structural property relates closely to the proposition of Brown and Levinson (1987) that complaints are accomplished in conversation 'indirectly'; that is that they are developed over turns at talk – frequently in narrative form – and that the speaker may never overtly, or recognisably, complain. What this research into the structural properties of complaints illustrates is the primacy of the situation, particularly how speakers, or producers of complaints, orient to their recipients' uptake of the matter itself. Overwhelmingly it appears that the indirectness, or the preparatory work done before the complaint is produced is typed towards securing the support or affiliation of the hearer, and this uptake-sensitivity appears to be robust regardless as to whether this indirectness is characterised as a concern with maintaining face in interaction (Vásquez, 2011) or as a concern with securing preferred responses (or second pair parts) to the incremental development of the complaint (Curl & Drew, 2009).

So far the findings discussed have been based on speaker dyads where the recipient of the complaint is not the transgressor, or the subject of the complaint. Instead recipients are 'hearing *about*' a troubling matter from a complainant. Contrastive to this are *direct* complaints where the recipient is, or is responsible for, the source of the problem: they are the subject of the complaint. Direct complaints appear to be characterised by a different sequential structure and set of speaker activities. Schegloff (2005) has proposed that these sequences are structured with a first action of 'complaint', or mention of a 'complainable'[1], followed by a second action of a response, such as apology, denial, or an account, and then some uptake of that response (p. 465). Dersley and Wootton (2000) found that of responses to direct complaints, the provision of justifications or excuses for the trouble were the most common, where complainees accepted that the complained-of-action had occurred but avoided the attribution of blame or acceptance of responsibility by positioning the action as due to circumstances they couldn't control or to other people entirely (see also Antaki (1994) on Explanations in Exoneration). They also found these direct complaint sequences were implicated in the development of acrimonious argument and 'antagonism' (Dersley & Wootton, 2000), a notion supported by the research of LaForest (2002) who noted the role of direct initial complaints in the development of argument sequences. There appears to be awareness of this potential for acrimony amongst speakers, as Schegloff (2005) illustrates that in interaction speakers may address 'complainables'

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[1] A potential, but not yet realised, source of trouble or complaint within an interaction.

before they explicitly occur, through speakers forestalling the direct complaint sequences discussed above by apologising for some action or event that has not yet been complained about, or pre-empting the complaint themselves by pointing out how they may be at fault. So while direct complaints demonstrate a 'tighter' and more robust sequential structure, and are frequently characterised by the development of observable rancour, there is still a demonstrable sensitivity to this occurring, an awareness of recipiency. Again, the production of direct complaints can depend on the orientation of the speakers towards the matter, as it can in indirect complaints.

Structurally then direct complaints appear to have a recurrent sequence-type that may be characterised as normative within sequence organisation: the adjacency-pair of complaint – response has been repeatedly demonstrated. For indirect complaints a structure has emerged that is more convoluted where a complainant takes *multiple turns* characterised by forming a *complaint narrative* that constructs the trouble source, and which is coloured by concerns with securing the affiliation or support of the recipient. I turn now to a review of speaker practices in constructing these narratives; of what complainants do, their particular uses of language and strategy, when they produce these narrative complaints.

Vocabularies of Complaining

Narratives involve the production of speakers' versions of events. In constructing a matter as a complaint speakers need to work up the trouble-source as just that: a trouble or grievance, not a neutral version of events. Events instead are cast negatively—as appreciable transgressions of a moral order. In this sense complaints are "morally implicative stories" (Edwards, 2005, p.8). One practice for accomplishing this is for the speaker to demonstrate that they themselves have a negative stance towards the matter. Expressions of moral indignation – where the speaker reports their own (often emotional) response to the matter – commonly accomplishes this (Drew, 1998). Edwards (2005) notes that this is regularly done in the initial announcement of a complaint narrative. Stance can also be demonstrated by speakers use of 'reported thought', where they describe their 'thinking' evaluations of the events they report in their complaint narratives, particularly their evaluations of speech that they may report (i.e "he said *x,* and I thought..") (Haakana, 2007).

Implicating matters as transgressions is also achieved by the way speakers formulate and describe the events. One frequent practice is the use of extreme case

formulations: descriptions that work to categorize events or persons as extreme examples of something (Pomerantz, 1986). In the case of complaining this involves describing events and their effects as being especially negative, offensive, or harmful. Pomerantz notes that these work persuasively, to "assert the strongest case", legitimizing the complaint itself and guarding against possible non-sympathetic hearings (p.227). A related practice is the use of idiomatic expressions in making complaints. Drew and Holt (1988) describe how speakers use these figurative expressions to provide the 'upshot' of narrative details such that they "go further than the circumstantial detailings do in characterising the strength of the grievance found in those detailings" (p.405). Idiomatic expressions too work to portray events in a negative, or especially negative light then. The authors also found that this practice was commonly deployed by speakers in complaint narratives where the recipient had not yet demonstrated affiliation with the speakers' negative stance towards the matter (Drew & Holt, 1988). Like extreme case formulations, then, they also have a persuasive function in attempting to secure sympathetic hearings.

As was mentioned above (p. 6), standards and expectations can also be formulated in complaint narratives that the trouble source may be juxtaposed against to cast it negatively (Vásquez, 2009). These standards may be referenced personally and explicitly (as in "I expected..") or more broadly and subtly, by speakers setting up or invoking normative standards in their narratives and positioning the trouble source as in violation of these, that is, as transgressions of commonly accepted codes of conduct (Drew, 1998). Complaint narratives also go further than depicting a negative stance or describing events in valenced ways, they also attribute responsibility, or blame (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009). In doing this complainants work up the agency of their subjects (Edwards, 2005) and this may be done by speakers positioning negative events as deliberate or intentional on the part of some complainee (Drew, 1998). Fault, or the attribution of fault, appears to be an integral aspect of indexing a matter as warranting a complaint.

Finally, complaining speakers may work to render the matters they narrate as objective accounts of that matter instead of subjective or interested versions (Edwards, 2005). One way that this is accomplished is by emphasizing facticity through specific details, such as reported speech (Drew, 1998; Haakana, 2007), or as Whalen and Zimmerman discuss in their (1992) investigation into complaint calls to the police, by

outlining how the teller is especially privileged or entitled to the facts by their location or identity.

The summative points of this review of research into the actual production of complaints are these. Direct complaints occur as straightforward sequences where a complaint (or accusation) is followed by its response. Indirect complaints have a much looser structure, but are still identifiable as 'bounded sequences' with an initiating beginning and a closing. Overwhelmingly the practice used to 'accomplish a complaint' within these sequences is narrative, or constructing a version of events such that they are negative – worthy of complaining. In so building complaints speakers clearly design these descriptions so as to maximise the chances of an affiliative reception by speakers, and to minimise their hear-ability as stemming from the disposition of the speaker. A range of practices are used to achieve such descriptions and to ensure that events are flavoured as palpably negative grievances – moral transgressions – which warrant complaint and invite support.

And so a contrastive picture of complaints emerges with the discursive research outlined above. Complaints as interactional events – complaints themselves, that is – clearly represent a rich and complex site for analysis. A critique of the consumer and social psychological approaches was that they had foregone this aspect of the research paradigm, although there may be some similarities in the findings of each type of research. For example one significant link appears to arrive in the form of dissatisfaction and its treatment as an outcome of discrepancies. There seems to be a possibility of convergence between this as a theoretical construct and as a speaker practice in complaints. However there is a gulf between the approach and methodologies used by each camp. The Consumer and Social Psychological results discussed above were derived from Likert-Scale surveys, imagined complaint scenarios and paper and pencil personality measures. The discursive results are derived from naturally occurring complaints drawn from recordings of mundane conversation. And of course also both camps have markedly different views of what constitutes phenomena of interest in the first place (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Synthesis is not an imperative, and both kinds of research could of course continue to exist alongside one another, however this seems a tremendous waste, particularly in terms of the potential utility of the discursive approach to complaining in the commercial context of complaint handling. This sphere is predominantly informed by the former research paradigm, the consumer/social paradigm, as opposed to the latter discursive approach.

This is due largely to the absence of discursive investigations into complaints that occur in commercial or institutional contexts. That is the primary focus of this thesis. Before proposing the research questions and outlining this study I will outline some research into the commercial and industrial context of complaining by discussing research into customer services work, predominantly from authors concerned with industrial psychology and the sociology of work.

Working Complaints: Commercial Complaint Management

"Customer complaints bring the customer relationship to a crossroads where the company's actions and communications will determine the future. Company policy and/or an employee's decisions will typically decide whether the customer goes or stays." Stephens, 2000.

Professional labour dedicated to receiving, processing and resolving the complaints of consumers is considered a variant of that category of work labelled 'Customer Services', whose practitioners "interact with customers in order to provide mostly intangible outputs that are consumed at the time of the process" (Yagil, 2008, p. 2). Service work now encompasses the majority of work performed in most developed economies (Swartz & Iacobucci, 2000). Concomitant with the rise of the service economies has been a burgeoning 'best practice' literature dedicated to refining customer service as a productive and economically beneficial form of labour for commercial firms (e.g Total Quality Management, (Evans, 2005); Customer Relationship Marketing, (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 1991)), as well as research which has approached the field in a more critical light (e.g Sturdy, 2001).[1]

Within such literature there exists models or guides for how to handle complaints through customer service work, representing the transformation of a descriptive 'psychology of complaining' into an actual practice in the workplace. Deemed 'service recovery', complaint handling focuses on problem resolution, regaining loyalty and custom, and on using the information received to inform organizational change (Stephens, 2000). In this sense, complaints 'get things done' at levels beyond the interpersonal. They may inform, for example, changes in company policies. Much of this literature focuses on the workers' behaviour itself, recommending displays of empathy and sincerity, perspective-taking, and being attentive (Davidow,

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[1] Managerial and commercially oriented literature emphasizes the importance of quality customer service; of empathy, energy, and a 'customer-focused attitude'; and a personal commitment to the values of the organisation (du Gay, 1996). Critical literature instead characterizes customer service work as inauthentic, inherently stressful, Taylorised, and largely reliant on 'emotional labour': the coercive mass-marketing of emotional expression (Korczynski, 2001).

2000). The success of an organisation's complaint handling is determined largely by customers' *ex-post* justice perceptions: whether they perceive the organisational response as equitable along distributive, procedural, and interactional lines (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Organising work and workers based on the apparent preferences of consumers in this way has been termed 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' (Korcynzski, 2001).

Prescriptive guides for conduct aside, the actual activities that constitute work for customer service professionals are primarily interactions with customers. Traditionally these were performed face-to-face however they are now overwhelmingly separated over both time and space by developments in information communications technology (ICT) and computing (Eason, 2002). This work typically involves workers interacting with both callers and computer software simultaneously. Specialist software is designed for the particular tasks customer services workers perform, a developmental process termed 'Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW; Eason, 2002). Workplace studies, ethnographic and ethnomethodological analyses of labour concerned with work as a situated and collaboratively produced activity (Heath, Luff, & Knoblauch, (2004), have been conducted which offer detailed accounts as to how technology features in the practical accomplishment of tasks. For example, how calls to emergency services are managed and the information distributed in order to perform relevant organisational responses (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1992), or how cockpit instruments are vital in the joint accomplishment of 'sharing cognition' between pilots landing a plane (Hutchens, 1997). While much commercial and marketing literature exists on organisational frameworks for handling complaints effectively and utilising the information provided by them, there is currently little research on how this is practically accomplished, *in situ*, by customer service agents. So while, for example Larivet and Brouard (2010) state that service failures should be recorded and disseminated through organizations to enhance the strategic position in the marketplace, this process *as an activity* has not been approached empirically. Of interest also are comments within the critical literature on service work that researchers frequently ignore the orientations of workers themselves to their labour (Wray-Bliss, 2001). With their adherence to empirically derived conclusions and their focus on the endogenous workings of phenomena, workplace studies may represent an answer to this issue in customer service research.

It is now clear that there is a professional reality to the phenomenon of complaining in the form of customer services work, a form of labour that is characterised by interactions with both customers and forms of ICT infrastructure. While extensive 'best practice' literature exists on how these individuals should perform this work, there is little research into how it occurs *in situ.* It is a similar situation to the research into complaining: while the social and consumer literature have extensive models and notions of causality, these haven't integrated the actual *production* or performance of complaints in interaction. The present study seeks to address this issue by investigating these concerns: it asks, how is complaint handling actually done in a particular institution, and how does complaining-as-interaction occur in an institutional context? It is relevant now, then, to introduce the current project in light of this state of affairs.

The Research Project.

Using data derived from an organisation dedicated to receiving and resolving the complaints of consumers, this research looks to address three issues relating to the research questions posed in the introduction. Firstly, how are complaints managed in this particular workplace, and how does this management constitute a form of accountable, practical work for employees? In a workplace study, I investigate empirically how complaints are handled and managed, and how this process is integral to the role of the institution in its function as a regulative authority of an industry. Through doing this I work to develop an understanding of complaint handling that is informed by local, empirical investigation and that may extend existing understandings of complaints as work.

Secondly, if there does appear to be a normative conversational model of complaining, with recurrent features and practices, then how does this pertain to the particular organisational version of complaining revealed in the ethnographic investigation? I investigate this by assessing the structure of complaint call openings and how callers' own orientations and practices fit with the apparent organisational imperatives of institutional agents. Lastly I consider the discursive and CA claim that complaints have particular properties – speaker practices employed in order to complain – through an analysis of the complaint narratives delivered in the corpus of complaint calls. Through this analysis I hope to inform existing discursive understandings of how complaining is done in interaction. Fundamentally this research considers complaints as

a practical activity in two senses: as a practical workplace activity accomplished by individual activities, established systems, and institutional structures and procedures; and as an observable interaction between two speakers, a complainant and an institutional complaint recipient. This orientation to the observable and active components of complaint handling and complaining is due to the key doctrine of this research—utility. It seems that current accounts of complaining, those employed in commercial scenarios and expounded in managerial literature are highly abstract and heavily reliant on evidence that is external to the actual behaviour of complaining itself. Too often it has obscured, glossed-over, or ignored entirely the phenomenon as a practical activity for complainants and the agents who receive and process their calls. This literature is useful, it is used widely, however it is reasonable to claim that it would be usefully complemented by forming understandings of how complaining is actually done, as it is observably affected by institutional procedures and performed in institutional interactions. For example, training procedures for those learning about complaint handling may be helpfully assisted by examples and an informed analysis of actual complaints. Furthermore, it might also be useful to develop a system of analysis that allows individuals working with complaining customers the ability to analyse and develop their own methods by investigating their workplace activities and their interactions with customers themselves. With this in mind I turn to an account of the methodologies employed to conduct the present research.

Chapter Two

Research Methods

This thesis is based on two forms of data. Firstly, it is based on sources of data familiar to workplace researchers and ethnographers: documentary analysis, participant observation methods, and interview data, analysed in order to explicate fully and empirically how complaints are performed, handled, and managed within the office of the Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria (EWOV). Secondly, it is based on the complaints and enquiries received by this organisation through their telephone service provided for energy and water customers. EWOV provided audio recordings of these calls to the supervisor of this research, Dr. Ann Weatherall in late 2008. Specifically, it draws on 23 of these complaints and enquiries, which have been transcribed according to the conventions of transcription for Conversation Analysis (Jefferson, 2004, appendix A). In this section I outline the research approach used in each of the three analytic chapters that follow, beginning with the ethnographic investigation of EWOV

The Ethnographic Investigation

Ethnography has been referred to as the "craft of place" (Geertz, 1983, p. 167) that investigates social phenomena in terms of their how they are produced and reproduced in observable quotidian situations—everyday life. Garfinkel (1968) deployed the term 'ethnomethodology' to refer to the *actual practices* used by members of groups[1] that achieved this. This mode of research grants analytic primacy to members' own actions and their reasoning about such actions, and it considers such actions and reasoning as formative of the phenomena under study. The individuals considered in ethnographic investigations are approached as expert practitioners with a rich store of techniques, skills, and knowledge which they consistently deploy in the realisation of social action (Townley, 2008). These 'techniques, skills, and knowledge' are the methods that they use to realise such social actions—the methods described in the term ethno'method'ology (Rawls, 2000). The ethnographic method has informed the field of research known as workplace studies. These studies consider work itself as a practical accomplishment, and their focus is to "examine the practices and procedures,

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[1] 'Members of groups' is used here as it is the most encompassing definition. 'Groups' may refer to informal gatherings, agents of an institution, or indeed of a society itself. In this case the 'members' are those members of EWOV that are the subject of the ethnographic analysis.

the socially organised competencies, in and through which participants themselves use tools and technologies in the emergent production and coordination of social action and activities" (Heath, Luff, & Knoblauch, p. 342). Fundamentally the goal of such research is to investigate what is done in a workplace to achieve tasks relevant to the institution, and to the role or identity of the agents of that institution, and to do this it relies on observations of workers in their material environment, and on workers' own accounts and reasoning of the activities they perform and the roles they occupy within the workplace, a complementary approach that Suchman (2000) has termed 'material practices' and 'accountabilities'. Currently research into customer service work – and in particular call centre work – is largely observational in nature and focuses on the tasks performed by institutional agents. While this research does afford the reasoning of agents a key place in its analysis through interview data, this is frequently directed towards researchers' a priori concerns with such phenomena as asymmetries of power within workplaces and systems of control (see, for example, Bain & Taylor's (2000) critique of Fernie & Metcalf, (1998)) and an insistence on interpreting the work through established paradigms—for example the 'Power Triangle' of workers, managers, and customers (Lopez, 2010). Primarily the goal of the investigation of EWOV was to avoid any such critical approaches in favour of one that granted a primacy to the institutional agents themselves: to their activities, and to their reasoning about those activities. To reiterate: the research goal here was to explicate how complaints and enquiries were treated and managed in the institution by workers as a series of practical actions, in particular interactions with customers and with technological tools, and to form an understanding of the institutional context as a force in shaping the way that complaints and enquiries were handled.

I employed three approaches. Firstly I examined documentary material concerned with EWOV itself and its role in regulating the energy and water industry of Victoria. I was concerned here with establishing an understanding of the institution in terms of its stated social and legal functions as a dispute resolution service and regulator. In particular this also represented a method of communicating an understanding of the institution based not on the immediate perspective of workers or customers but rather on the perspective of persons external to the institution itself who focus on its role in "wider social orders" (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999, p. 28). It also enabled the development of an incisive account of the systematic approach to complaints adopted by EWOV: how a consumer complaint is transformed and

transmitted along a network of agents in order to accomplish the overarching institutional goals of regulation and dispute resolution.

Secondly, following approval of the Victoria University School of Psychology Ethics Committee (SOPHEC) I conducted two separate participant observation sessions of institutional agents while they went about receiving and processing complaint calls. Through a headset device I was able to listen to agents' interactions with callers while at the same time observing the physical activities they performed, in particular the way that they used their computers and its tailored software (their ICT system) to manage and record the particular aspects of callers' complaints and enquiries which were relevant to their work roles and to the role of the institution. In addition I was provided with a detailed explanation and demonstration of that software itself from these participants, with an emphasis on the way it was organised into a series of logically ordered workflows which treated the work of call-takers as a progressive series of stages.

Lastly, again following the receipt of SOPHEC approval, I conducted several semi-structured interviews with various agents of the institution. The semi-structured approach was favoured due to its flexibility—it afforded me the opportunity to explore themes as they arose in both the participant observation sessions and in the interviews themselves. The approach also allowed the room necessary for interviewees to explore these themes on their own volition in interviews. Three of these were with employees whose' role was, or had been, handling the enquiry and complaint calls of customers (Intake Officers). An outline of the interview procedure and questions are attached as appendices B and C. The Information Sheet and Debriefing form provided to participants prior to (and following) their participation are attached as appendices D and E. These interviews were focused on the interviewees' accounts of the work that they did. Specifically, they focused on how they performed the tasks required by the role, their use of the ICT systems in the execution of their work, and the operations of EWOV itself—how it organised itself in terms of the strategic objective of handling and processing complaints and enquiries in the service of regulation of the energy and water industries. Discussions were also conducted with EWOV's Quality Assurance team to render a further account for how the institutional roles and requirements of Intake Officers affected their working activities. In particular this enabled an explication of the required institutional standards for complaint handling. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed, with pseudonyms inserted for all participants in line with the ethics

application. In addition field notes were compiled at all stages of the ethnographic research. The transcription method used for these interviews diverged from the Jeffersonian format used in the subsequent chapters due to the analytic focus: I analysed the *content* of the interview accounts, and did not treat them as conversational phenomena. While all the talk itself was captured, I eschewed rendering features such as pauses and breath markers as I did not treat interview accounts as interactional phenomena.

These three research activities constituted the data for the ethnographic investigation outlined in the next chapter. What it represents is a detailed account of one institution's approach to complaint handling that is grounded firmly in the activities performed in the workplace itself and informed by the accounts and reasoning of its agents. Workplace studies and ethnography are allied to studies of interaction using Discourse Analysis and CA, methods that inform the remaining two analytic chapters. Despite this there is some tension between the two over what may be regarded as relevant material for analysis, and by extension, empirical conclusions (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). For example, Arminen (2005) discounts ethnographic notes and interviewing as sources of data entirely in examining institutional interaction. Despite this, the use of an eclectic approach employing combinations of the two has been recommended in workplace research provided that it follows a particular logic (Hak, 1999; Silverman, 1999). The comingling of approaches depends, essentially, on the issue at hand. This study *is* focused on institutional interaction, but it also treats the activities of those within the institution itself as warranting analysis: it is through combining both approaches that the explication of how complaint handling is done can be most fruitfully and clearly laid out. I have positioned the ethnographic analysis before the two CA-based chapters because the findings it presents makes these latter chapters much the clearer, particularly in terms of the actions of the institutional agents in conversations with callers—that is the logic at work here. Considering the paucity of research into complaints as institutional events and the thesis' orientation to empirical material over theory I consider the inclusion and position of the ethnographic approach defensible.

Institutional Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology

The two analytic chapters that follow the ethnographic investigation are derived from the analysis of conversations occurring between callers and Intake Officers. This

analysis is guided by the principles of Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology. The first of these chapters investigates the opening stages of complaint and enquiry calls as callers provide their 'reason for the call' in the form of offering an initial formulation of the matter or the activity itself. The second chapter investigates a specific practice deployed by some callers as they provide actual narratives of the matter itself (complaints). Specifically, how they deploy self-disclosure as they go about describing the issue they have called about and casting it in a negative light. Each chapter draws on the principles of CA, however they do so differently. The investigation of the opening stages of calls aligns closely with established CA approaches to institutional talk. The investigation of self-disclosure in complaint narratives aligns closely to the approach and methods of Discursive Psychology. The application of CA research methods to institutional talk, and its use by Discursive Psychology researchers, have historically been matters for debate (see Schegloff, 1987). In explaining the methods for each chapter I work to provide accounts for this, taking care to describe the logic of my own research approach.

As it has developed as a system of analysis CA has concerned itself with naturally occurring 'mundane' interaction, and it has gradually accumulated a wide range of normative practices used in achieving social action through talk. The fundamental findings have explicated normative practices for turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974), for the features and organisation of repair when there are problems of hearing speaking or understanding in talk (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), and sequence organisation, the way that social action in talk may be investigated through adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007). From these foundations other practices have been investigated and the field has been able to produce a hugely detailed and informative understanding of the mechanics of conversation and the way that social action is 'done' through talk in interaction. Despite this, some forms of talk appear to differ from those models developed from mundane talk. Termed 'institutional interaction', such conversation is investigated in terms of the way talk may deviate from mundane interaction with reference to particular institutional relevancies that may pertain to each situation (Arminen, 2005). This Institutional CA investigates interaction in order to assess "how specific practices of talk embody or connect with specific identities and institutional tasks" (Heritage & Clayman, pp. 16-17). Naturally, institutions vary widely in their roles and functions, and therefore talk may be affected in different ways. The program of analysis for institutional talk is to offer explicated accounts of *how* this occurs in

interactions themselves. In their seminal introduction to this research field, Drew and Heritage (1992) present some fundamental criteria for this type of interaction. They point out that institutional talk features particular *goal orientations* for each participant that may be manifested through their turns at talk, that particular institutional *identities* and *inferential frameworks* may be oriented-to by participants, and that there may be particular constraints on what may be said by participants. For example, in courtroom cross examinations, witnesses are constrained to produce answers to questions put to them by counsel, and are unable to deploy their own questions (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Institutional CA considers the particular accomplishments of an institution as produced through talk itself, as interactants work to establish a shared sense of their particular project and incrementally work to 'bring it off' in the conversation itself, and this notion of shared sense is referred to as intersubjectivity (Arminen, 2005).

Through investigating talk these particular features are considered and used to gain an empirical understanding of how speakers collaboratively *do work* with their talk and demonstrate their mutual understandings of that work. Regarding workplace studies, researchers using CA have developed a particular approach to investigating interactions in institutional environments. In chapter four, I investigate the corpus of complaint calls to EWOV in terms of the particular structural organization of their openings. The structural organisation of institutional talk has previously been explored in such interactional environments as emergency call centres (Zimmerman, 1992) and doctor-patient consultations (Robinson, 1998). The logic of investigating the structural organization of institutional interaction is that it allows the researcher to identify the recurrent and reproduced activities of institutional representatives' conversations and the goal/task orientations that each represents (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Focusing on the openings of the calls allows an analysis of how the institutional agent (the Intake Officer) and the complainant each orient to the situation and work to align themselves to the project they are collaborating on. The analysis of structural organisation involves parsing the conversation into its component parts. 'Component parts' refers to a type of activity that both the caller and the call taker orient to as in the service of some sub-goal of the interaction: the recording of caller details, for example, or the giving of advice about a particular matter. To do this, I analysed the structural properties of complaint and enquiry calls, separating them up into parts based on the activities performed by

speakers, and from the information received from Intake Officers in the ethnographic research process. Through this process I identified the following activities[1]:

1. Openings, including greetings, callers' formulations of the reason for the call and Intake Officer uptake.
2. Details gathering.
3. Mandatory Field questions.
4. Complaint narratives.
5. Explanation of the role and process of EWOV.
6. Resolution option selection.
7. Closings.

This analytic chapter looks to identify particular speaker practices employed in call openings with an eye to gaining an understanding as to how both Intake Officer and Caller come to align on the institutional reality of complaint and enquiry handling—the stated business of EWOV itself. It treats these openings as the point where participants' particular orientations to the situation and the task at hand come to meet. The ethnographic investigation will reveal a detailed understanding and set of practices used by Intake Officers, however these may be unknown to a caller to the institution, who instead may have their own understanding of 'how to do' complaining or enquiring. In order for the successful accomplishment of an activity to occur the participants must establish some shared sense of the activity and the particular tasks needed to accomplish this. Call openings represent a critical zone for this process, as the participants work to establish understandings of what will follow in the interaction, to the activities required of them. In addition such an analysis also enables a depiction of how it is that particular activities get done in terms of caller practices, potentially offering an account of any varying practices in complaining to an institution, something that the literature review revealed to be under-researched at the present time. The approach taken in this chapter was to collect a sample of call openings and then analyse each, searching for recurrent patterns in the talk. I identified and analysed callers' initial formulations of the reason for the call, and then I analysed how the talk developed from these points. Specifically I investigated how the turns-at-talk developed from these initial formulations, in particular how Intake Officers responded to different types of opening formulations.

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[1] These activities reliably occurred across the corpus, however not in a consistent *order*. This point is elaborated on in Chapter Three.

Through this I worked to provide an account of how alignment to the particular project of an interaction comes to take place.

Clearly this Institutional CA approach focus places the use of language and its occurrence in interaction at centre-stage, however there is another research program that is also applicable to the data and research questions at hand here: Discursive Psychology. Underlining the majority of research based on discourse and interaction is an orientation to the constructive nature of language in forming social reality, or versions of social reality (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). That is, a fixed or objective truth is eschewed in favour of *accounts* of reality that are produced by speakers and writers in meaningful ways which orient to the particular situations such accounts occur in. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) note: "people use their language to *do* things: to order and request, persuade, and accuse" (p.32, emphasis in original). Within social psychology, this research approach is termed Discursive Psychology, or DP (Edwards & Potter, 1992). It is apparent from the interactional research into complaining, particularly indirect complaining, that it is brought about through *narratives* of events that work to present those events as a trouble-source, as warranting the complaint itself. That is, they construct versions of reality such that they may be recognizably negative, or may recognizably have been caused by the deliberate actions of some deviant party, and may position the complainant as helpless, hard done by, or in need of assistance. In light of that, and of the inherent variability in how complaining is actually done, the method and stance of Discursive Psychology represents a promising approach to the present question surrounding how speakers (or customers) present matters such that they are 'complaints', or 'complaint-worthy'. That is, within this data corpus, how do they present versions of events or accounts of reality as they go about complaining?

Although it draws heavily on their principles and technologies of research, this program of analysis differs somewhat from that of CA and Institutional CA. The research goal of Discursive Psychology is to offer a re-specification of traditional Social Psychological phenomena by considering such phenomena as discursively produced through talk occurring in particular situations. That is, "Discursive psychology approaches the topics of cognition, mental states and psychological characteristics as matters under active management in talk and text" (Edwards, 2006). As an example, Edwards (1994) conducted an analysis of Script Theory that considered this as a concern for speakers who constructed accounts of reality, or versions of events, as formulaic, recognizable instances of particular phenomena, and found how this could be

used to construct events as either routine occurrences or as exceptional events. Now the literature review depicted several research perspectives that have been drawn on to analyse complaining, in particular from social and consumer psychology. We have seen that each presents it as a different kind of activity. The divergence in these representations is apparent in the methods used by researchers: Maute and Forrester (1993) gave participants in their study imagined scenarios of service failure and then asked them to indicate how likely they were to complain on a Likert-rating scale, and this led to their conclusion that the magnitude of failure predicts increased intentions to complain; in discovering that idiomatic expressions are commonly used to indicate the upshot of trouble sources in complaint narratives, Drew and Holt (1988) analysed a large corpus of transcribed naturally-occurring conversations that had been recorded. A range of methods are clearly applicable, however Discursive Psychology takes issue with traditional social psychological approaches such as surveys and Likert-scale assessments, because it does not consider them as faithful depictions of the phenomenon under study. That is, it would not consider the results of these measures as indicative of, for example, 'dissatisfaction', or 'the propensity to complain'. Instead such phenomena are approached not as private mental states or attributes but as publicly accountable domains that speakers *themselves* invoke and make relevant in their talk (Edwards, 2006). A discursive treatment of complaining then would treat it as a speaker's concern and would concentrate on the way particular language was used to perform, or recognizably work to accomplish, the activity.

The final chapter, then, concentrates on speaker practices in the complaint narratives delivered in the calls themselves. This is related to Drew and Heritage's (1992) concern with turn design, specifically the second aspect: "the details of the verbal construction through which the turn's activity is accomplished" (p. 32.). As the literature review noted, CA and other discursive researchers have identified a range of practices used by speakers who are complaining, however there has been very little research that has investigated this using institutional talk. The principle aim of this discursive analysis was to analyse the complaint narratives occurring in the corpus, which were collected following the parsing of individual calls into their particular activities, and to identify any recurrent features that complainants appeared to be demonstrating. While several practices emerged from this analysis, the one that is focused on in this analytic chapter is that of self-disclosure, where speakers 'reveal' themselves, or aspects of their lives during their complaint narratives. In this chapter I

work to outline how this practice of self-disclosure relates to the activity of complaining, in particular how it works to index the called-about event or matter as warranting support or action on the part of the Intake Officer. Through this analysis I hope to add to existing understandings of how complaint narratives are performed by speakers such that they are recognizably *complaints*.

It is through the use of these research methods that I hope to form a detailed empirical account of how complaining is accomplished not only in interaction but also as a particular work activity occurring within an institution. The ethnographic analysis – the workplace study – sheds analytic light on how complaints function as a workplace activity in a way that is more specific than the abstract notions of 'service recovery' and complaint management frameworks outlined in the managerial literature. That is, it goes some way to adding thickness (Geertz, 1973) to existing accounts of 'complaints as work'. The Institutional CA and Discursive Psychology research chapters – analyses of the structure of interactions and the deployment of self-disclosure in callers' complaint narratives – offer research that further thickens the ethnographic description and also makes room for analysis of customers' orientations toward the institution itself and to the performance of complaints. It is through this approach that I hope to form a comprehensive and situated account of complaint handling as a practical and institutional reality, exposing the technical and procedural methods at work and also the interactive component of complaining, the unassailable notion that as a behaviour and as a professional practice the phenomenon is interpersonal, and is executed through interaction.

Chapter Three:

Complaint-Handling at Work

- Understanding requires comprehension within its own regime (Townley, 2006).

This chapter works to build a rich, detailed account of *how* complaints are handled by dedicated professionals within the institution under study. Through observation and interview data it generates an exposition of the practical, accountable activities that constitute complaint handling. I begin with a description of the function of the organisation (EWOV), garnered through documentary analysis and wider research. Next I present a descriptive account derived from participant observation sessions. This carefully outlines how it is that a complaint is handled with reference to the activities of the individuals that were observed. The observations are in the service of describing the material practices of complaint handling at EWOV. Interspersed with these I provide and discuss interview extracts selected through an analysis of work themes that arose in the interviews. Participants offer their own accounts of aspects of the complaint-handling process that lends the practice meaning. This approach aligns with Suchman's (2000) method of investigating a workplace through material practices (observations) and 'accountabilities' for those practices (interview data).

Privatisation of the Victorian Energy Industry

The formation of EWOV was precipitated by the privatisation of the Victorian Energy Industry, which was initiated in 1992. This involved the sale of what were previously state-owned assets (power plants, distribution networks etc) to interested private firms (Williams-Winn, 2003). The transformation of the Victorian energy industry over the 1990s occurred as part of a broader shift in theory and discourse surrounding public policy and approaches to the delivery of public services. This shift saw the operations and outcomes of competitive consumer markets valued as preferable means to ends of lean-running, efficient service delivery as opposed to traditional models of central or state control over services. Importantly, this shift to market based systems saw the rise of new forms of regulation for these markets, as governments sought to retain some vestiges of control over critical services and to ensure the new industries were accountable to the public. Innovatory regulatory provisions sought to develop inline with the altered relationship between the public, government, and the 'right' to essential services: as services passed from state control to private ownership

the role of the citizen altered to that of the 'citizen-consumer', a paradigm shift that regulatory codes and bodies have continually adapted to address (Ryan, 2001).

In the case of the Victorian energy industry, two regulatory bodies work to answer the challenges of privatisation and public accountability. The first is the Essential Services Commission (ESC, formerly Office of the Regulator General). This is an independent agency concerned largely with economic concerns surrounding pricing, but also with issues such as minimum levels of service for energy companies. The ESC controls the licensing necessary for participation in the energy market. Participation is contingent on the receipt of these licenses by a company. The conditions of these licenses are extensive, and importantly for present purposes, they include that firms must establish their own complaint-handling procedures and policies, and that they participate in the existing industry ombudsman scheme: EWOV.

The Development and Current Role of EWOV

First established in 1996 as the Electricity Industry Ombudsman of Victoria, the organisation became responsible for the gas and water industries by 2001 and was henceforth titled the Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria. The organisation, a company, defined by charter and possessing a constitution, is legally separate and independent from energy and water companies, yet is funded by these member companies, who pay a varying (customer-base size dependent) fixed amount and then an additional quantity determined by the number of contacts the EWOV has received regarding each particular member company.[1] This reflects a key principle of 'light touch' regulation, whereby industries themselves are actively engaged in their own regulation and the ongoing development of industry standards (Naylor, 2002). As of the end of 2010, there were 66 member companies operating across all areas of the electricity, gas, and water industries (EWOV Annual Report, 2009-2010).

EWOV operates as an alternative dispute resolution service, focused on non-adversarial solutions that achieve resolution without recourse to the courts or the common law (McCloud, 1999). A charter has established its jurisdiction, and this excludes issues of pricing, government policy, and events 'beyond the reasonable control of a member company' (Naylor, 2002). The principle role of EWOV is stated to be the pursuit of complaints '..in a fair, reasonable, just, informal and expeditious manner having regard to the law and licenses, industry codes, deemed contracts and

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[1] This aspect of charging can be extremely specific. The EWOV software records how long intake officers spend on aspects of a call, for example, and part of this charge is based on that.

good industry practice applicable to the relevant participant' (EWOV Charter, 2006). EWOV additionally receives and responds to enquiries regarding issues under its jurisdiction.

A secondary though critical role of EWOV is in reporting the broad state of the industries it oversees. In the 2009-2010 period EWOV received a total of 42,505 customer cases. 4,075 of these were enquiries. 38,430 were complaints (EWOV Annual Report, 2009-2010). These volumes are high, and reflect a marked increase from the previous year, a trend which has continued throughout the operation of EWOV and particularly following the introduction of full retail contestability[1] and the concomitant rise in residential customers' complaints (McLeod, 2009-2010). EWOV categorizes complaints and enquiries into broad areas, for example billing, disconnection, or customer service. It then reports clearly on each company's performance in these areas, providing information to inform both consumers and commercial operators themselves, and monitoring systemic issues. In this way EWOV applies actual complaints to the major task of regulation. Edwards and Potter's (1987) claim that language is used to accomplish action is borne out dramatically – complaints originating in interaction eventually perform work at levels beyond the individual and the interactional.

Structure of EWOV

EWOV's primary role is dispute resolution, however they also receive and respond to enquiries of energy and water consumers. Complaints are integral to dispute resolution, representing the initiation of the process and informing, in each case, how that process is carried out. The vast majority (92%) of complaints and enquiries are received by phone. The initial contacts of callers are received and dealt with by a group of Intake Officers. Primarily their role is to register the details of the caller, of the particular matter itself, and to set in motion a particular resolution process.[2] Subsequent to this initial stage there are three possible avenues for a complaint:

1. An Unassisted Referral. Where the customer has contacted EWOV with a complaint *before* raising the issue with their company they are referred to the internal dispute resolution services of that company.[3]

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[1] Occurring in 2002 this allows retailers to compete for providing services to residential customers. Prior to this competitive retailing was restricted to commercial customers (Williams-Winn, 2003).
[2] Although there are several other critical tasks performed at the initial contact stage, which will be reviewed in greater detail shortly.
[3] At this and indeed all stages, Intake Officers also outline clearly to customers their rights and responsibilities regarding the dispute resolution process.

2. An Assisted Referral. The customer details and details of the matter are recorded by EWOV. These details are provided to the dispute resolution service of the company in question who then contact that customer and attempt resolution.

3. An EWOV Investigation. Dispute resolution is conduct by an EWOV conciliator who communicates with both company and customer and works to reach a resolution using alternative dispute resolution strategies.[1]

It is through the caller's interaction with an Intake Officer that one of these courses of action will be set in motion, based on the particularities of the issue and the choice of the caller. Matters unable to reach resolution at the conciliation stage are referred to the ombudsman and/or the deputy ombudsman for resolution or a binding decision. While the majority of work expressly dedicated to 'dispute resolution' is performed by these groups, many additional work groups are employed to support and sustain their operations. For example, an information technology group monitors the databases, software, and systems used to manage the information used by intake officers, conciliators, and other staff. A learning development officer organizes a range of training programs, for example providing staff with information about developments in the energy and water industries, public relations, and communication. Of course, the total quantity of working groups within EWOV, and their functions, is far broader and more complex than this brief description illustrates. However this investigation is concerned with only the first stage of the total process, the receipt of complaints and enquiries by intake officers. The organizational infrastructure and composition is introduced only insofar as it offers insight into the institutional structures and processes within which the impending interviews and conversations take place. I now focus on the activities performed by Intake Officers receiving complaints, and on interview accounts of those activities.

Intake Officers' Orientations to Systems and Complaints

The on-site research conducted at EWOV, and particularly the participant observation sessions revealed the centrality of the local computer operating system to the work performed there. The software system used by Intake Officers, and EWOV as a whole, is called RESOLVE. Across the interviews and participant observation sessions I developed a clear understanding of the organisation of RESOLVE. I'm going

[1] Conciliation is itself separated into four stages, depending on the complexity, severity, and urgency of the matter.

to begin with a list of the tasks that RESOLVE requires for a complaint to be filed and for the dispute resolution process to proceed from its initial stage.

Tasks

1. Caller details: name, address, and contact information.

2. Mandatory fields: a set of seven categories that specify some aspects of the complaint.

3. Complaint details: a description of the issue itself and the caller's resolution expectations.

4. The resolution option that the caller chooses to pursue.

These information fields need to be 'answered' by the Intake Officer entering the information provided by the caller for a complaint to be considered prepared—ready to be compiled in the next stages of the EWOV complaint handling procedure so that the dispute resolution process may begin. With this as an introduction, I move now to the activities of Intake Officers and their accounts for them.

Alexis[1] had worked as an Intake Officer at EWOV for eighteen months. I observed Alexis over a period of forty-five minutes, in which time completed were all the necessary steps to completely process three calls. To perform the observation I sat beside Alexis at her pod, a work-station that housed the tools required of her to work: computer, keyboard, telephone and headset, as well as several labelled folders with information regarding energy policies, other 'helping agencies', and legal information. Equipped with an additional headset, I was able to listen to the calls Alexis processed while simultaneously observing how she used her resources and computer software (the RESOLVE program) to record the necessary information of calls and craft the reports for the completion of the initial stage of a complaint.

The first key observation of Alexis' work concerned the synchronicity between her conversations with callers and her use of the RESOLVE interface. RESOLVE has several stage-wise components referred to as the 'workflow', summarised in figure one below:

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[1] As the methodology introduction noted, all names of research participants are altered throughout the report.
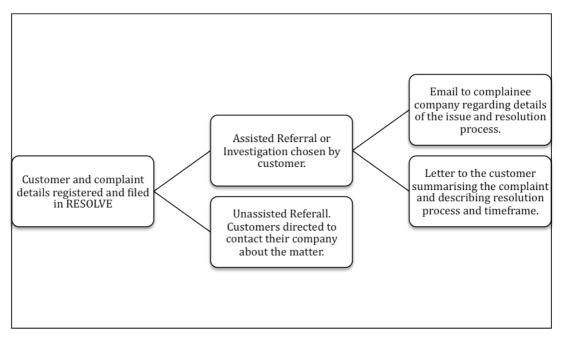
Figure 1. Activities in the RESOLVE workflow.

The initial workflow concerns the input of information into a customer file, and this includes a sequence of blank entry fields for the input (typed) of caller information (name, address, contact information), a series of vertically-ordered drop-down boxes relating to the general and procedural details of the complaint, as well as a text-entry box for the particular, specific details of the complaint.[1] The caller details section and the drop-down boxes are referred to as 'mandatory fields' due to their completion being necessary for the filing and storage of a customer report in the database. The mandatory drop-down boxes concern the following:

1. Name of the company in question.
2. Issue type (Electricity, gas, or water).
3. Number of contacts the customer has had with that company regarding the issue.
4. Date of their most recent contact regarding the issue.
5. Date of their initial contact regarding the issue.
6. How they were referred to EWOV.
7. Complaint category (i.e billing, credit concerns, customer service, marketing).

Notable in the observations of Alexis was the uniform and consistent *order* in which she presented the caller with *questions* relating to these fields—questions were asked in

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[1] RESOLVE does not oblige intake officers to complete information entry into each field in an either/or, ordered fashion. Intake officers are, theoretically, able to work between them freely.

the precise order that they were organised on the screen.[1] Instead of typed answers, these drop boxes require the selection, by the mouse, of one of a range of fields. This enables the Intake Officers to rapidly proceed through the list. As answers were being produced by the caller and then selected by the intake officer, the next question was being simultaneously produced.

Participants discussed the activity of completing the mandatory field tabs with callers in interviews:

> **[Interview 3. Ben. P. 3]**
>
> But I- basically, the RESOLVE screen is set up where you can go around the RESOLVE screen and actually use that to ask your question. So you start recording the details like their details and which company's involved. In the middle bit you talk and get an idea of the details of the complaint, what you need. And there's drop down boxes on one side, and those are a really good guide to what questions you're going to ask like; "How many times have you spoken to them about it?" and "How long has this been going on for y- when did you first contact them?" or "Oh and can I just ask how did you know to contact us about this issue?"
> And so you can use the drop downs as questions. And because the drop downs are quite important questions they feel that what you're asking are quite important questions to their complaint.

Here Ben describes a different order of action to that observed: first gathering *some* of the mandatory field information, then the details of the complaint itself, and then moving back to the mandatory field information. His account clearly orients to using the 'drop down' categories to inform the production of questions, and it also demonstrates an awareness or sensitivity to callers' perspectives of this activity—they feel that important questions are being asked. Finally it also demonstrates a correspondence between the physical layout of the RESOLVE screen and particular conversational activities: it is *'in the middle bit'* that he works on the details of the complaint. The actual interaction itself is accounted for in part by the spatial properties of RESOLVE.

> **[Interview 2. Anna. Pp. 1-2]**
>
> And then I move to the mandatory fields within RESOLVE. And I do make it clear, to that customer, that I'm only looking for brief answers. If that means I have to go on to say; "I'll just describe what I'm doing right now it's sort of like a questionnaire, and it has drop down answers, so I'm only looking for, for example, number of contacts, I just want a number". Because people will say; "Oh I spoke to Rose, and she said this, and then I spoke to Phil..". And it's like, I just want a number. And sometimes people will go further and say; "Well I spoke to Peter.." and then I'll say; "Well is the number zero, is the number two?"

Anna's account also evidences that, in the conversations, question-answer activities are used in conversations to complete the mandatory fields. She provides active voicing to describe how she goes about this: explicitly directing the caller to the mandatory field activity as a 'questionnaire' with 'drop down answers' that requires only brief

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[1] Though questions were not always required. Alexis on 5 occasions entered answers into a drop-down box without a question; the caller provided a relevant answer unprompted. Notably on 4 occasions this was at the beginning of the call.

responses. As her account proceeds it becomes clear that callers providing too much information can be problematic. Anna's solution then is to provide the caller with an explanation of the RESOLVE layout, a vivid invocation of her task at hand that orients *them* to that task. Absolutely, both Intake Officer and caller are critical to completing the complaint in RESOLVE, but through different ways: the caller has the information, while the Intake Officer has the technical tool that orders and records that information— making the workings of RESOLVE knowable to the caller represents in this case a way of aligning callers to the activities the Intake Officer needs to perform.

It was apparent in the observation session that after the opening[1] of calls, Alexis consistently asked an initial question regarding the caller's previous contacts with EWOV. This was, apart from the greeting, the first activity she would initiate in each of the calls. The utility of this became clear when, in the third call, the customer confirmed that they had done so. This meant that Alexis needed only ask for the caller's name, which was sufficient to rapidly locate their profile on the database (EWOV holds caller details permanently). The profile provides caller details and the details of cases previously lodged, whether resolved or ongoing. With the details of the caller already on file, Alexis was able to forego this activity and move straight into her mandatory-field questions and the details of the complaint. In interviews I discussed the openings of calls.

[Interview 1. Sian. P.1]

So I'll get the call, and you need to identify if the customer's lodged a complaint with us before. Sometimes, rarely, customers will call in and start telling you all about their complaint and if you don't check their history on the system you'll type it all up and send it off and then you'll realize- the provider will come back and say so and so has already lodged this earlier today, or last week why are you lodging it again? So the first thing obviously is to check if they've called us before.

Sian's account indicates her approach is the same as Alexis'. She goes on however to account for this not as a time-saving concern but rather as a practice that may prevent problems arising further down the line of the dispute resolution process. Recall the workflows, the paths of these complaints: they are communicated in email form to the company concerned. Sian's account demonstrates that opening with a 'past contacts' question can also serve to ensure that complaints are not 'double-filed', upsetting the systematic communication network between EWOV and its member companies.

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[1]These are the subject of the next chapter. Openings routinely consist of the institutional greeting, followed by the greeting of the caller and then a turn that provides a reason for the call, or initial formulation of the trouble.

However asking this question as an initial activity in conversations with callers is not consistently done, as Anna's interview account demonstrates:

[Interview 2. Anna. P. 1]

My preferred order is to first explain EWOV's role and process. That comes back to quality assurance. If I forget, at the end, I will be marked down on my competency, so - I have forgotten in the past and I've learnt my lesson so I put it right at the front. And then the next thing I take is the customer's information, and there's a series of questions within that that I always try and ask, just; "Are you the account holder? Is there a co-account holder?" something like that. And then I move to the mandatory fields within RESOLVE.

Anna's account chronicles a different approach. Her initial activity is to provide the caller with the role and process of EWOV, a practice she performs due to the quality assurance system within the institution (discussed below). This illustrates variation in the way that Intake Officers order their activities, and more importantly, variation in their orientations to *why* they perform them. Clearly there are multiple factors that may impact the approach of an Intake Officer to their work, the RESOLVE layout, the dispute resolution process, and the internal processes of EWOV all may have an impact on the way that Intake Officers carry out their work activities, and their conversations with callers. In addition, what these practices and accounts introduce is the notion that complaint calls to EWOV are not strictly dyadic affairs: the complaints involve more than complainant and recipient. For example, the RESOLVE program is not a passive recording tool. Instead it influences the talk, by offering an order for the questions of intake officers. Their activities align to the design and demands of the system, and this can flow out to influence the immediate local demands of the conversation itself. This is a notable divergence from the turn taking model of ordinary conversation. It is apparent in this instance that the content of talk, the types of turns, *may be* set in advance, as opposed to being spontaneously determined by interactants (Sacks et al, 1974).

Entering the particular complaint details involves entering the key facts of the issue into a summary screen at the centre of the RESOLVE display. These facts are used in subsequent workflow stages as the complaint is communicated to concerned member companies and a summary is sent to the caller. Alexis would enter this information as coherent, grammatical sentences in a list-wise fashion. Occasionally these points would be entered while the caller spoke, without any interruption to their talk. More often however these points were entered following responses to questions put to callers by Alexis. It would be Alexis herself who, through questioning, would orient the caller to the provision of information relevant to the complaint summary box—these were asked during the callers' delivery, or description, of the complainable

matter. These points were not entered 'verbatim', or as a faithful rendering of the callers' own language. Rather Alexis would type in a concise summary of the caller's talk. For example, a lengthy and complex description by a caller that recounted estimated bills and occasions where a meter reader had 'skipped' her house, some two minutes in length, was condensed down to two points: 'Concern over four consecutive estimated bills' and 'Concerned the meter reader may be missing her house'. The apparent divergence between the caller's descriptions of the issue and the actual *use* of that information – the actual text that eventuated in the summary screen of the RESOLVE program – was striking. A significant portion of the interviews involved the Intake Officers discussing callers' complaints (the activity of receiving and recording complaint details) and how they approached this as a work activity.

[Interview 3. Ben. P. 5]

"Sorry, alright now you were telling me before about the problem so 'go'".
And then I'll listen to the story but try in my mind to get it into a chronological order in terms of dates and I will ask them questions like "Sorry can I just ask, what year did that happen?" or "How much was that?" Little bits of more detailed information, closed questions to fill in the gaps.

Ben's account describes a similar activity to that observed with Alexis. That is, listening to callers' complaint narratives and also inserting questions in the service of gathering information that 'fills in the gaps'. He discusses this further:

[P. 6]

It sounds stupid but you kind of have like a filter, where I only look for the information that I know is necessary. So I'm listening for dates and amounts and little things. It's almost like I let the other stuff just pass, because I'm listening for key words and listening for things, and so I use it as an opportunity to type down. And especially- once I've got the information that I need, I can actually use them to- like let them go on about things that aren't relevant to the case as an opportunity to catch up on my administration of it.

This is a very detailed description of the activity. The listening that Ben describes is comparable to 'active listening', a focused and attentive form of listening (Rothwell, 2010). It clearly illustrates the particularities required for the activity of registering complaint details: dates, amount and, 'key words'. Ben also describes using this particular activity – the complaint narrative – as an opportunity to complete other tasks while the caller speaks or 'goes on'.[1] This suggests a high level of nous and skill in balancing the tasks of complaint handling: engaging with the caller in conversation on the one hand and lodging the case in RESOLVE on the other. In this case he describes 'using' aspects of one task to help complete a different one. Callers 'going on' in narratives however may not always be benign, as Sian describes below:

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[1] In all interviews, complaining, or callers' talking, was consistently referred to using some modified form of the verb 'to go'.

[Interview 1. Sian. P. 4]
I'm very aware of that- as well, if I can sense that they just want to get it out, or even if they- if they tell me from the start, "I just want to tell you that.." and if I interrupt "no no, let me finish, I want to tell you that.." then I'll sort of just let them go. But also try to control the call at the same time, like it can't be too long.

Sian's account too references the 'going' of complaint narratives but in a different way, in this case 'letting them go,' particularly if they are insistent, or somehow indicate that they 'want to get it out'.[1] This comes with an ensuing tension however of keeping calls under a reasonable limit of time. As will be mentioned below, Intake Officers are recommended to keep calls within particular times through the quality assurance process. 'Letting a caller go' may represent a threat to this particular standard. The order of the narrated events that callers provide may also be problematic:

[Interview 2. Anna. P. 4]
When they don't answer the question that you've just asked. That's a difficulty. Also if they've – if they're doing the 'time travellers' story, where, right there's no chronological line. So it's like watching one of those movies where it's jumping all over the place and you're just like; "When did the – when did the meter get read? When did you get the bill? Because you've just turned it around and it's confusing now". So, if customers give me something in a beautiful chronological line I'm just like; "Oh thank you, thank you very much, that's perfectly clear".

Here Anna describes how the questioning of callers during complaint narratives can be problematic when callers don't provide relevant answers. In addition her account demonstrates a clear preference for chronological order. As Ben's account also demonstrates, and as the observations of Alexis attest to, a serial order of events in the complaint details section of RESOLVE is important so that the report of the matter progresses in a sequential fashion. But this can be difficult in light of the division of labour in the way that complaints are formed: the caller provides the complaint itself and expresses it, however the Intake Officer is the one who records the specific, relevant details. Each may have contrasting approaches to this. Intake Officers clearly may prefer a serialised order. A caller may instead prioritise events in a different manner.

Following the collaborative task of gathering and entering the details of the complaint, Alexis performed three further tasks (excluding closing) while online with the caller; explaining the role and process of EWOV; establishing 'what they are seeking as a resolution'; and then determining the path of action[2] that the caller wishes to pursue. In the three calls I observed, Alexis performed these tasks in a consistent order; the explanation of the role and process of EWOV preceded the discussion with

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[1]Recall the literature review: Catharsis or venting is a commonly cited reason for complaints (Alicke et al., 1992). As this account demonstrates this property may extend to institutional understandings of the actual delivery of complaint narratives.
[2] Again, this consists of either an assisted referral or an EWOV investigation.

the caller regarding their choice of action, and that was consistently followed by some talk by Alexis regarding the expected timeframes for this (referred to as expectation management[1]). Observably similar to Alexis entering a 'concise summary' of the callers' talk during the gathering of complaint details was the procedure for recording the resolution goals of callers. In every instance Alexis would initiate this action with a *"what would you consider a fair and reasonable outcome for this matter?"* question. Answers of callers were not recorded verbatim. For example, *"Well, I don't want to pay a high bill"* (a caller's answer) was recorded as 'Requesting a high bill investigation and a meter test'. When calls close, the RESOLVE workflow directs Alexis to the final two stages. The information gathered in the RESOLVE program is conglomerated into two report formats; an email for the company in question, and a letter for the caller. Once the Intake officer has crafted these documents they are despatched, and this represents the initiation of the dispute resolution process.

Intake Officers Orientations to Systems and Complaints: Luke

Luke had worked as an intake officer at EWOV for four months. I spent half an hour conducting an observation of Luke at his pod, in which time two calls were completely processed. Like Alexis, Luke appeared to order his activities during calls in line with the RESOLVE layout, asking the mandatory field questions in the same order. Relative to Alexis Luke had less experience as an intake officer, and this was manifest by his pod having more resources related to customer interactions. Like Alexis Luke had identical reference folders dedicated to the same topics, additionally however Luke's pod had three printed 'scripts' pinned to the divider behind his computer display. These were verbatim statements dedicated to 'greeting', outlining the role and process of EWOV, and outlining for callers the options available for reaching a resolution.[2] They were affixed to the divider in a position that enabled them to be visibly accessible to Luke regardless of his immediate orientation to his desk— prominent regardless of whether he was working at the RESOLVE program or seated at the other side of his desk. This omni-accessibility of the scripts was purposeful, and amounted to evidence for the essential yet variable nature of the activities they performed (barring the greeting script, of course). That is, describing the role and

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[1] This effectively involves providing the customer with a 'forecast' of their chosen resolution option, particularly focusing on the timeframe – when they should be contacted next about the matter.
[2] Titled the 'Referral script'. Callers are offered either an assisted referral or an EWOV investigation through this script.

process of EWOV, and providing referral options, had an indefinite position in interactions with callers. Whereas Alexis could produce these actions spontaneously in response to the demands of the moment they were required, Luke required them to be permanently accessible: to perform the actions, he needed to read the script, and the positioning of these scripts answered the challenge of the vicissitudinous 'when' of these actions in conversations with callers. In interviews Intake Officers discussed the learning process of developing the skills required for complaint handling at EWOV. Specifically, discussion was instigated by asking how long it takes to develop a sense of expertise, or the ability to deal with challenges.

[Interview 1. Sian. P. 3]

I'd say it took about six months, before I felt confident. Three months is sort of the- I mean the longer you're there the easier it gets, but six months I mean that's when you feel like you can work on your own, like you find yourself asking less questions.

Sian gave six months as the time period for her' developing a sense of confidence, and presented working on her own as a marker for this accomplishment. This learning process encompasses not only the immediate activities of interacting with callers and using RESOLVE to lodge cases but also broader concerns. Here is the subsequent talk from the exert above:

Yes the system itself is quite a complicated thing, to be able to deal with all of that and listen to someone at the same time I can see how that would take that long to get used to. (Joe).
Yeah it takes- for me to have felt completely confident, in myself as well, 'cause at the start you're thinking, you know "who do I email?" and things like that, you're just trying to understand not only the industry but also how to work the programs as well. For me, that worries me a bit when I like- when I'm unsure of something that stresses me out, I sort of get all panicky, and that goes with time.

Here Sian presents three areas of concern, the workflow that directs the lodged case to concerned parties; the industry itself; and the RESOLVE system ('programs'). As the first sections of this chapter illustrated the energy and water industries in which EWOV operates are notoriously complex, but having an understanding of it is critical for Intake Officers who must deal with issues that may theoretically come from any part of that industry. They must develop a high level of specialized knowledge of all of its parts.

[Interview 3. Ben. P.8]

Yeah I guess the difficulty is that you're not always going to have people who have those nuanced skills so you need to have a system in place that anyone can use. So I think that's probably the difficulty. And also I mean when I was new I was completely at the mercy of the system as well, it took a few months before I could really understand 'how this works', then it just becomes natural and succinct and you just do it.

In Ben's account the expertise gained through experience is described as 'nuanced skills' and the process itself becoming 'natural and succinct'. It demonstrates the link between activities (using RESOLVE) and understanding those activities. He also discusses this development of skills in relation to the RESOLVE system: a system that 'anyone can use'. Being 'at the mercy of the system' relates to the way that it purportedly offers a particular order of activities for the Intake Officer to base their work and their interactions with callers on.

The second key observation of Luke also concerned resources and their use. The pod-based open-office architecture of EWOV, coupled with the technologies of wireless telephone headsets and 'on hold' function telephone units enables a degree of freedom of movement for intake officers during calls. Solutions to queries and the demands of particular interactions may be physically sought by intake officers moving to find specialized expertise. This observation occurred in the second call, a complaint regarding 'predatory marketing'.[1] Following her selection of an assisted referral to allow the retailer in question to resolve the matter, Luke outlined the role of a consumer rights agency who provide solutions to consumers wishing to avoid visits from marketers, mainly in the form of 'do not knock' stickers. While Luke could outline the function of both the consumer agency and the stickers and offer these to the caller, he was momentarily unable to recall the name and contact details of the service. The caller expressed interest in the offer—Luke was bound to provide the information to complete the transaction. He used two resources, firstly he placed the caller on hold, and then he moved to an adjacent bay of pods to discuss the matter with another intake officer. When Luke returned, he was able to provide the name and contact details of the agency, as well as describe the stickers in greater detail. This illustrated a key resource for Intake Officers outside of their immediate environments, each other, and how this is enabled through the physical organization of their working environment. The pod dividers allow Intake Officers to observe one another. Luke was able to identify an available colleague before leaving his own pod. Interactions with callers then are, again, not strictly dyadic. Collaboration may occur with other Intake Officers (or other staff) in the search for solutions to arising challenges, and colleagues may function as a resource in this way. These observations of Luke's methods for processing complaints reveal that the accomplishment of this task can involve interaction with networks outside the

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[1] Strong competition, particularly in energy retailing, has been met with strong direct marketing. Telesales and door-to-door sales visits are the practices for this direct approach. Such marketing becomes 'predatory' when it is unsolicited and repetitive.

individual Intake Officer. Similarly, Alexis sent letters for despatch to an EWOV department separate from her own to complete the final workflow of a complaint. The work of Intake Officers occurs then within and as a part of an active network that *collectively* supports and orients to, more or less directly, the broader organisational goal of receiving and registering complaints in a way that conforms to the general mission of EWOV as an institution.

The analysis above reveals that complaints are both observably and accountably a detailed and systematic achievement, with particular requirements that are sensible to the institutional environment they occur in. The final aspect of this ethnographic investigation concerns one final institutional technology that influences the way that complaint handling is executed at EWOV, namely the quality assurance process.

Maintaining the Method: The Count

The observations of Alexis and Luke offer a demonstration of the particular actions performed by intake officers in their performance of their work roles. These actions, and the particular way that they are performed, constitute the methods that render an intake officer as a meaningful, functional, and productive entity within the larger structure of EWOV. In addition, they are the methods that result in the production of a complaint as an institutional, workable entity and the initiation of dispute resolution. So far such methods are apparently directed and shaped largely by the intake officers themselves and the particular ways they apply themselves and their resources to the challenges they face in processing complaints and enquiries from callers. Through this lens their actions are discernible as being contingent on *immediate* demands. Yet there are further factors that work on influencing the nature and manner of these methods and their performance. The methods of Intake Officers are not determined solely by the immediate demands of interactions with callers or the ordered nature of their software. Systems are in place at EWOV, which at a more super ordinate level, work to maintain and develop those methods described through the observations and accounts. Specifically, 'counts' are fashioned that render the day-to-day performance of intake officers scalable; the methods they use, their actions and conduct, are standardized and made measurable, and this data is used to ensure that a set standard of performance is maintained across the work group.

Plainly, this maintenance of the methods of intake officers is an observable derivative from one of the core roles of EWOV: 'driving customer service improvements' amongst its member companies. EWOV staff themselves are involved

in delivering training programs at these member companies (EWOV Annual Report, 2010–2011). EWOV's regulation of the commercial—consumer relationship extends to *how* complaints and enquiries are handled; they may exercise authority over their industry in ways more subtle than outright dispute resolution *per se*. In light of this EWOV orients to a 'best practice' approach to complaint and enquiry handling that may operate as a benchmark for the industry. To this end the training and development of staff is considered an ongoing concern: the methods of Intake Officers (and indeed all EWOV staff) are continually subject to revision and development.

The Performance Counts

The main form that this count approach takes to the maintenance of the method of Intake Officers is 'Quality Assurance'. A team of two staff is employed at EWOV to continually monitor the performance of each individual Intake Officer through reviewing and assessing five of their calls per month. An interview was conducted with both members of this team during the research visit. This was devoted to an explanation and an observation of the quality assurance process. The assessment involves marking the performance of Intake Officers in each call against a checklist of criteria. For example, a numeric value is given to indicate how well intake officers demonstrate 'call control', 'resource use', and 'independent language'. To perform this count, the quality assurance officers randomly select a call from a database (all intake officer calls are recorded and stored) and listen to it at a computer. Beside them they have the checklist outlining all criteria and providing a space for marking the score for each in the right margin. Monthly, each Intake Officer meets individually with one of the quality assurance officers to receive feedback regarding their performance. The specificity of this individual count allows for the identification of strengths, and also aspects of the Intake Officers' methods that need further development. In this way the methods of each Intake Officer are continually reviewed and their performance updated. The process is not arbitrary: both quality assurance officers develop an intricate understanding of the particular actions required in Intake Officer calls and clearly communicated the importance of each, stating that 'all calls are a reflection of the organisation of EWOV'. In addition the performance criteria for parts of the Intake Officers' methods are clear and observable, and are framed as 'necessary actions' in a call. For example each Intake Officer needs to explain the role and process of EWOV to each individual caller at some stage in the call; each Intake Officer needs to 'manage

caller expectations' through outlining *when* they will be contacted next, *how* the issue will be dealt with, and *what* they may do in the event of dissatisfaction with that outcome. Scaling such actions, rendering them 'countable' aspects of a method, is reasoned as an approach that is at once concise, easily understood when delivered as feedback, and is consistent in its application across all intake officers.

The final two approaches within EWOV that influence the way that complaint handling is done are two other 'counts'. One of these concerns the overall performance of the Intake Officers as a group. This is a digital counter that is visually accessible to Intake Officers thanks to the open architecture of their workspace. The screen provides real time information of the service level of EWOV.[1] This provides a count based on how many calls are being answered within a particular timeframe. When this service level appears to lower beyond a particular level, Intake Officers may respond by changing the way that they do their work. To do this they prioritise receiving calls and lodging cases within RESOLVE, over completing the final two workflows. RESOLVE allows Intake Officers the ability to return to their saved cases and then complete those final workflows at a time when it is less busy.

Lastly, RESOLVE itself provides a counter for Intake Officers to monitor how long each activity takes as they are working with a caller to lodge a complaint. There is a recommended time for each workflow, in particular for the time spent with a caller—this is a much more variable activity than the completion of the final two workflows, as it depends on the caller and the particular matter that constitutes their complaint. With the timer accessible to them, Intake Officers may gauge how a call is proceeding, whether it is likely to be within acceptable limits or may go over, and they may adjust their approach to the call accordingly, for example, by initiating specific questions. As the interview accounts regarding the activity of complaint narratives suggest, this particular activity may be problematic regarding the time it takes. The RESOLVE counter enables an Intake Officer the chance to monitor activities like this.

Coda: Complaint Handling at EWOV

This chapter sought to question the logic of existing research approaches to commercial complaint handling, or 'complaints as work'. Specifically it set out to challenge an overly simplistic understanding of complaining within academic and

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[1] EWOV aims to answer 90% of all first calls. Callers contacting EWOV are organised into a waiting queue through the telecommunications system of EWOV. As intake officers finish calls they draw new callers from this waiting queue.

managerial literatures by performing an in depth analysis of what actually occurs in a particular institution dedicated to handling the complaints (and enquiries) of consumers. At this point some conclusions may be made. What the investigation has revealed is that, in this particular institution, 'complaining' is something far more complex than the expression of dissatisfaction about some issue, or state of affairs, and 'complaint handling' is a highly specialised practice requiring multiple resources and a high level of technical skill. The analysis speaks to both complaining, and complaint handling. Firstly the role of complaint recipient in this institution (the Intake Officer) is one that is highly involved in the way that the actual complaining is done. This involvement is observable through the way that Intake Officers work to have callers provide information that fulfils the requirements of the particular system that they work with— RESOLVE. This is information that callers may not consider relevant to complaining, and so through questioning and other practices Intake Officers work to reconcile them to their own 'version' of what complaining is, and how it is done. This level of detail is not currently accounted for in the literature: definitions of complaining do not ordinarily have that the complainant' provide contact information as a criterion for accomplishing a complaint. At EWOV however, this is essential. Complaining is not, at least as an institutional practice, something that may neatly be boiled down to fit the kinds of definitions discussed in the literature review. For those in the business of complaints, it is an ongoing concern, an accomplishment, with a range of incremental stages that need to be worked through with the caller. The second important conclusion is that in doing this work, the professional agents involved develop special practices and a certain level of expertise that is directed toward 'getting complaining done' in a way that conforms to the particular requirements of the institution they work in. This is important in light of the prescriptive literature directed towards developing effective complaint handling. Both the observations and the interview accounts revealed a high level of both technical skill and interpersonal nous that frankly goes far beyond existing advice, for example that those working in complaint handling should practice perspective-taking, and being attentive (Davidow, 2000). It may be that a research orientation to developing detailed understandings of the practical activities and technical skills are more useful than generic guidance that borders on common sense. That notion of technical skill has also been revealed to be especially important in light of the fact that complaining does certain things; commercial complaints have certain objective outcomes—in this case accomplishing consumer redress and industry regulation. There is a framework in place

for this, RESOLVE, that is implicated in the accomplishment of these objectives. And not only at the macro level but also at the micro level—the level of the interaction itself, as this system is used to guide the complaint handling interactions with callers. Close observations in this analysis have revealed the actual activities that animate that system. Again, this level of understanding is important in developing an understanding of complaint handling and informing any improvements to it.

This chapter sought to question the existing approaches to commercial complaint handling, or 'complaints as work'. Specifically it set out to challenge an overly simplistic understanding of complaining within academic and managerial literatures by performing an in depth analysis of what *actually goes on* in a particular institution dedicated to handling the complaints (and enquiries) of consumers. It has revealed a complex array of forces that work together to shape how complaint handling is done. I will return to the main conclusions of this analysis in the discussion, as they need to be further interpreted in light of what follows: analysis of the actual conversations occurring between Intake Officers and callers to the institution.

Chapter Four: Negotiated Beginnings
Callers' Opening Activities and Intake Officers' Responses

- I have said that when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to share – Goffman, 1959, p. 6.

The previous chapter investigated the workings of complaints within EWOV through investigating the work activities of Intake Officers. This revealed a systematic (although occasionally idiosyncratic) approach to the handling of complaints and enquiries in the service of industry regulation. In particular it showed the centrality of the software used to record and organise complaint information to the way that work activities are organised. RESOLVE is not only expressly related to the nature of the complaints received (for example, by listing gas, electricity, or water as complaint categories), or to the constitutionally defined procedures dictating EWOV's process (producing documents for both the complainant and the complainee in the final workflows), but also, apparently, to the moment-to-moment accomplishment of the interactions with callers. Across observations and accounts, Intake Officers used RESOLVE, or described using RESOLVE, as a reference or a direct guide for the way they approached the activities required to complete a filed complaint. In addition it was revealed that training, role requirements, and experiential learning among other things influenced *how* Intake Officers went about their work. While there was variation, each observation or account expressed some *order*: a systematic approach to complaint handling on the part of Intake Officers. We have then a detailed and reasoned account of *how* complaint handling is a practical institutional accomplishment.

This chapter moves to extend this by focusing on complaint and enquiry calls themselves—the business of the Intake Officers working at the EWOV office. This introduces the complainants to the research and enables the analysis of their activities as they go about complaining. This represents a shift in the focus of the analysis. Complaints are considered not only as practical, ordered work activities but also as an interactional accomplishment exhibited in conversations between Intake Officers and callers. Recall that the CA and discursive research presented in the literature review have established that particular normative practices exist for indirect complaints occurring in quotidian interaction. In particular, researchers (e.g Jefferson, 1988; Drew, 1998; Curl & Drew, 2009) found that speakers consistently introduced the activity of complaining (or troubles talk) through announcements or story prefaces that served to

demonstrate stance and to seek the affiliation of the recipient to that talk. Such turns may be inspected for what they reveal about a speaker's orientation to the activity, and their uptake may be inspected for the orientation of their recipients. The research here is directed to see how customers' orientations toward what they are seeking to accomplish in their calls – demonstrated through their talk – come to be reconciled with the Intake Officers' own orientations: to the systematic activities they perform in the service of getting a project started. The previous chapter provided an account of EWOV's 'version' of what complaining is and how it is done. How does this fit with callers' own versions of the practice? This question is approached by investigating the opening stages of complaint calls, where callers introduce their 'reason for the call' and Intake Officers produce responsive turns that illustrate how they take up callers initial accounts of 'what they have called about'.

There is a significant body of CA research into call openings in institutional interaction. In their analysis of emergency call openings Whalen and Zimmerman (1987) demonstrate that greeting and 'how are you' sequences are omitted as callers move directly into the activity of requesting institutional assistance—their interactional goal. The authors describe a range of formulations that speakers use to accomplish this: direct requests, problem reports, and event descriptions. Similarly, Potter and Hepburn (2003) investigated callers' formulations of their 'reason for the call' to a child protection helpline. They identified that callers formulated these reasons in line with an orientation to 'being concerned' about the events that they reported, and that these 'pre-moves' worked to manage several tasks, demonstrating callers' orientation to the role of the institution; attending to asymmetries of knowing between interactants; allowing call-takers to attend to seriousness instead of facticity; and displaying caller stance. A critical finding of Potter and Hepburn was that callers' initial concern constructions were recurrently treated by call takers as being incomplete, warranting further action on the part of the caller, and this further action repeatedly turned out to be extended narratives of the events that the caller was concerned about (2003).[1] The 'reason for the call' exhibited a critical function in projecting the way that the particular activities of the call would develop for both parties. They performed important work in establishing some shared sense between both parties about 'what would happen next', while concomitantly establishing the institutional relevance of the matter, seriousness, and

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[1] Although at this helpline call takers were institutionally bound to move to provide callers with an 'ethics exchange' prior to the delivery of event narratives by callers. This interrupted the progression from the reason for the call and the subsequent telling.

caller stance. Finally, Emmison and Danby (2007) found that the opening turns by call takers at a children's helpline service, which didn't explicitly offer any specific service (offer to help), worked to make it incumbent on callers to produce reasons for the call in a two-part format: initially announcing a 'trouble' and *then* moving to provide the reason for the call in more specific terms.

This chapter analyses call openings of two separate lines of activity: enquiries and complaints. I examine how callers formulate their reasons for the call in each and how Intake Officers orient to these turns. In discussing the orientations of Intake Officers I consider their 'next actions', and examine whether they accomplish institutionally relevant tasks, those tasks identified in the previous chapter. Through this approach I explicate how this opening sequence of action in calls reveals each party's orientation to the project at hand and then assess how this develops. I refer throughout to this practice as 'opening formulations'; 'initial formulations of the matter'; and 'initial problem formulations' (in the case of complaints). These terms are used interchangeably with the 'reason for the call'. They are used as they offer more specificity to the practice in each particular instance. As Emmison and Danby (2007) discuss, the 'reason for the call' may not be best approached as a singular unitary turn at talk. It may vary widely in the way that it is produced by speakers calling institutions.

Distinguishing Activities in Reasons for the Call: Enquiries

An initial analysis of callers' opening formulations revealed that they demonstrated an orientation to the categorical functions of EWOV's frontline service: dealing with *either* complaints or enquiries. This was observable through the different types of formulations used by callers. Enquiries are less common than complaints, making up 9.6% of Intake Officers' case-load in the 2009-10 period (EWOV Annual Report, 2010). Nonetheless they still represent an important and relevant activity for Intake Officers to perform, and the analysis of these calls revealed that they were markedly distinct in the way that they were initially formulated by callers and treated by Intake Officers. Callers with enquiries would routinely formulate this as their reason for the call explicitly:

Extract 1. [233001: Handwritten Bill, p. 1]
```
1    CON:    good morning office of the energy and water ombudsman
2            this is  Stacey
3    CAL:    yes Karly my name is Darleen .h I have a query I have
4            (.) received an account from (.) Genesis
5    CON:    mhm
```

Extract 2. [289016: New Solar, p. 1]

```
1     CON:    Ghhoo:d afternoon office of the energy and water
2             ombusman,=this is Lucy speaking¿
3             (0.8)
4     CAL:    >ye<:-um: hi this is Sally Rommer calling how are
5             you?
6     CON:    good thank you.
7     CAL:    ˚.hh˚ um I just have an enquiry um? .hh I've
8             (0.6)I've um I built a house about six years ago
9             (0.2) an:d I had a solar hot water system phhut
10            on .hh: now: (0.6) I:- I've actually had an enquiry
11            with you guys before, >hh .hh< with my electricity?
12            (0.6)
13    CAL:    uh:m (0.2) I'm just the enquiry I am making toda:y
14            is um I've got (0.4) what happened was (.) is we've
15            >just<=disCovered that they've actually had Our (.)
16            solar hot water on a da:y rate?
17            (0.6)
18    CAL:    with uh:m so we've been charged for our hot water
19            (0.4)
20    CAL:    all the time¿
21            (0.6)
22    CON:    do you mean pea- at peak rates on:ly?
23            (0.2)
24    CAL:    yeah
```

Extract 3. [219002: Indian Gentleman, p. 1]

```
1     CON:    good morning energy and water ombudsman this
2             is Yarn speaking
3     CAL:    I'm sorry who am I speaking to?
4     CON:    Yarn
5     CAL:    Yarn
6             (0.2)
7     CON:    yes
8     CAL:    Yarn good morning yarn my name is Maggie .hh
9             u:m (.) a-just an enquiry please Yarn
10    CON:    yes?
11    CAL:    .hh I had a hh well I think it was a bit strange.
```

As these excerpts demonstrate callers with enquiries would explicitly name this as their reason for the call. Clear also, however, is that each formulation differs in its overall design. In excerpt 1 the caller formulates her reason for the call as an announcement – "I have a query" – and then immediately proceeds to move into a 'telling' that begins to describe the event that warrants the query. The query formulation works to forecast this: the caller orients to 'telling' as being in the service of actually 'doing a query'. At line 5 the Intake Officer's 'go-ahead' response (Schegloff, 2007) demonstrates her alignment to a story-recipient role in the interaction, demonstrating acceptance of that telling as a relevant next activity. The opening in excerpt 2 differs from this. Here the caller uses questioning intonation to package her formulation of the reason for the call. Despite this difference her subsequent talk still clearly illustrates features of 'telling'. She moves to describe the events that relate to her enquiry, although this is eventually abandoned as

she produces a turn that orients to establishing some sense of her previous dealings with the organisation. When this isn't taken up she continues to offer turns that serve to specify the matter at hand, the subject of the enquiry. It is at line 22 that the Intake Officer offers her first turn related to the activity, where she works to clarify the details of the matter being presented. Except 3 differs again in the construction of the initial formulation. Here the caller presents the reason for the call in a form recognisable as a request, notably through the use of 'please'. However note the Intake Officer response at line 10. The upwardly-intoned 'yes' serves as a go-ahead response to that request, something the caller takes up as she moves into her telling.

What these initial formulations of enquiries indicate is a systematic practice at call openings for this type of call activity. Firstly, callers explicitly characterise their action – their reason for the call – as 'doing enquiring'. Secondly, both callers and Intake Officers appear to orient to the actual activity of 'enquiring' as being some form of 'telling', or narrative. Callers either immediately move into this, or Intake Officers deploy go-ahead responses to signal its relevance as an activity, demonstrating they themselves are orienting to the role of story-recipient. Extract 2 appears to diverge from this pattern as instead of the Intake Officer offering a 'go ahead' there is instead a beat of silence. However her eventual uptake at line 22 which orients to the telling itself still illustrates that producing a narrative account of the matter is a normative 'next action' for a caller who has introduced their reason for the call as an enquiry, because offering questions during tellings is a relevant activity for a story recipient (Schegloff, 2007).

Something notable about initial formulation as enquiries is this: the absence of any demonstration of callers' stance toward the 'to-be-enquired-about' matter.[1] At the position of the 'reason for the call', enquiry formulations offer no evaluative indications. Examining the unfolding of an enquiry, it can be seen that this appears to be a consistent feature of this practice. However, as the tellings unfold, enquiries may become recognisable to Intake Officers as possible complaints, even without a caller indicating their stance to the matter, with important implications for how calls proceed. I demonstrate this now with an extended analysis of excerpt 1.

Extract 4. [233001: Handwritten Bill, p. 1]

```
1    Con:   good morning office of the energy and water ombudsman
2           this is  Stacey
3    Cal:   yes Karly my name is Darleen .h I have a query I have
4           (.) received an account from (.) Genesis
```

---

[1]Although there is evidence that they demonstrate a certain stance to the activity itself. In both extracts 2 and 3 callers introduce the activity of enquiring as 'just' doing enquiring, something that may evince a stance to that activity as being a small or minimal one for participants.

```
5    Con:   mhm
6    Cal:   for my gas- bill .h um all the details have been
7           changed on this account it's- my (.) husband's
8           name has been taken off .hh u::m our house address
9           has been given back the lot number that it was
10          about three and a half years ago [.hh] and also=
11   Con:                                     [mhm]
12   Cal:   =(.) the account has been changed (0.4) just by
13          ha:nd? .h they've crossed it through they've taken
14          off the twenty ninth of October .h and put on the
15          twelfth of November but they've written that on? .h
16   Cal:   um all our concessions have been taken off this
17          account? .hh when [ I phoned]
18   Con:                     [okay so::] Darleen I'll get you
19          to >just< slow down for me for a mom[ent  what I ]=
20   Cal:                                       [yeah sure(h)]
21   Con:   =need to do is lodge a ca[se] for you o(h)kay?=
```

Between lines 6 and17 the caller produces a narrative description of events that comes
subsequent to her reason for the call. This appears to be a common practice in enquiry
calls: in both extracts 2 and 3 callers go on to produce extended narratives interspersed
with questions and continuers on the part of the Intake Officer. In this call however the
telling is interrupted as the Intake Officer produces a turn at line 18 that orients the
caller to an institutional task—registering a case. As the next section on initial
formulations of *complaints* will demonstrate, Intake Officers introduce this activity
early in calls formulated as possible complaints. Examining the narrative of the caller in
this instance illustrates how the details represent possible *complainable matters,* as
opposed to matters that warrant enquiry. Two issues are identifiable: the bill the caller
has received has changed her and her husband's details, including their address, and
secondly this bill has removed their concessions.[1] The move by the Intake Officer at 18
exhibits an orientation to these matters as being relevant to a *complaint,* not an enquiry.
And as the call proceeds it becomes clear that this interpretation is accurate—the matter
itself warrants a complaint in the form of an assisted referral. Here is the culmination of
the call – it's outcome – which is reached some six minutes later:

Extract 5. [233001: Handwritten Bill, p. 4]

```
40   Con:      [.h] now um (0.2) a- what I can do is refer you
41           to a senior staff member within Genesis energy so
42           not their call centre sta:ff [.h]  um but their=
43   Cal:                                 [mh]m
44   Con:   =customer advocacy team?
45   Cal:   right
46   Con:   and they will have until the close of business on
47           wednesday to contact you and discuss the matter with
48           you further
49   Cal:   right then
```

---

[1]Effectively operating as rebates these see some Victorian energy and water consumers having a portion
of their bills paid by the state. Concessions are applied for by disadvantaged consumers and granted by
the state government.

And the talk that occurs in the six minutes separating this from the Intake Officers initiation of the case lodging activity is devoted, incrementally, to those accountable institutional tasks identified in the previous chapter, details gathering; completing the mandatory field information; recording the details of the issue; explaining the role and process of EWOV; and having the caller select a resolution option (an assisted referral), the procedural details of which are presented by the Intake Officer in the extract above. What was first formulated as an enquiry ('query') by the caller instead is taken up and treated as a complaint by the Intake Officer and this re-orientation sees the completion of complaint-relevant tasks and the actual lodging of a complaint. The important conclusion here is that even in the absence of caller demonstrations of stance, and even when a caller introduces their reason for the call as in the service of enquiring, Intake Officers may orient to the ensuing narrative, or telling, as in fact being recognisable as about complainable matters. Callers' opening formulations are not absolute. The activity that follows is open to the interpretation of Intake Officers—it is monitored and assessed as it unfolds and the initial formulation of a caller may be subject to revision. Callers' initial formulations of their reason for the call offer their introduction of what it is that they are doing, and concomitantly this communicates their approach to the particular situation (that they define it as relevant to enquiring). That such a definition can be revised by Intake Officers on hearing the actual details, and then re-categorised as a complaint is a demonstration of a high level of institutional expertise and the primary role of EWOV as a provider of resolutions to complainable matters. Callers may not be aware of matters that qualify for complaints and for enquiries. It is important for Intake Officers to make the distinction, however, because it is central to the accomplishment of regulation and ensuring fair dealings between consumers and their energy and water providers.

Initial Formulations of Complaints

The analysis of callers' initial complaint formulations, and how these are taken up by Intake Officers, found differences compared with initial formulations as enquiries in that speakers employed a more variable range of practices, and did not, except for one case, explicitly invoke 'complaining' as their reason for the call, supporting Edwards' (2005) claim that speakers work against indexing their talk as overtly 'doing complaining'. The variation in callers' initial formulation of the reason for the call had

major consequences for the way that Intake Officers would respond. One way that callers would formulate their reason for the call was in the form of a *request* for institutional assistance of some kind, for help or for procedural details. Callers would also commonly provide their initial formulations in turns that deployed some lexical term(s) that briefly described the matter. The outcome of variation here was that some initial formulations appeared to result in callers being prompted by Intake Officers to talk further about the called-about matter—to offer more description before the Intake Officer would perform their initial institutional task, for example beginning to gather details. It appeared that Intake Officers, as in the example above, oriented to recognising matters as complaint-relevant *before* instigating their own actions through their talk. I begin with an analysis of initial formulations as requests.

Requests for Help and their Uptake

Extract 6. [289012: The Factory]
```
1    Con:    good morning office of the energy and water
2            ombudsman this is larnie speaking
3    Cal:    oh hi sorry what was your name?
4    Con:    larnie?
5    Cal:    h-oh hi larnie .hh look um (.) T! I don't even
6            know where to start so I'm hoping you can help
7            me
8    Cal:    .h[hh]
9    Con:      [ha]ve you contacted our office before?
10   Cal:    no
11   Con:    alright I need to get some details first and
12           then you can tell me about the problem
```

At line 5 the caller introduces her reason for the call, following an adjacency pair that secures the identification of the name of the Intake officer. The caller's formulation for the reason for the call is recognisable as a request although this is not straightforward. The lexical item 'so' is a conjunction that presents the second clause of the TCU as a consequence of the first: the 'help' of the Intake Officer is required to address the caller's claimed uncertainty regarding how to go about whatever it is that she is doing. Of interest is the Intake Officer's uptake of this, and in several ways. Firstly at line 9 the initial response works to categorise the caller as either a first time caller or someone who's details will already be stored on the RESOLVE database, something that the previous chapter outlined as an occasional 'first move' of Intake Officers. As the caller indicates she is a first time caller the Intake Officer moves to gather her details at line 11, and note that how this is introduced with reference to it as a required activity

('need'), an ordered one ('first'), and lastly in the turn, how the Intake Officer projects what is to come – the called-about matter – as a 'problem'. Clearly, the initial formulation, which claimed uncertainty and didn't mention 'problem', or trouble or claim a stance of any kind is being treated as the initial introduction of a complaint. What this signifies is that in the absence of explicit references to the contrary (for example introducing the matter as an enquiry), callers' formulations may be treated as complaint-relevant by default.

In the next example a request is again introduced as the reason for the call but with a different uptake.

Extract 7. [232004: Two Company Fear]

```
1    Con:   good afternoon welcome to the office of the
2           energy and water ombudsman my name's Maddock
3    Cal:   oh good afternoon um I was wondering if you
4           could help me please .[hhh]h um (.) apparently:=
5    Con:                         [mm?]
6    Cal:   =I've gone and signed hh with (.) two: energy
7           people?
8    Con:   okay?
9    Cal:   HHa .hh um (0.2) I'm- (.) I'm a little bit
10          stressed at the moment and (.) I'm very confused
11          I don' know what I'm doing as far as this ([0.3])=
12   Con:                                             [.hh]
13   Cal:   =these energy things are going
14   Con:   okay well um what I'll do is: get some details
15          from you have you been in contact with our
16          office before?
```

This request differs from the previous example in that the request itself is not prefaced by any TCU or clause indicating what the request is *about*. Previously the caller's initial formulation began with reference to her procedural uncertainty that the subsequent request was hearably related to. In this instance the request is 'open'. The Intake Officer's 'mm?' at line 5 functions as a continuer and it indicates to the caller the relevance of furnishing that request with further detail. And so subsequently this is provided, first in the turn at line 6, which again is responded to with another continuer, and then with turns at lines 9-13, and in these turns the caller specifies the matter as institutionally relevant and demonstrates a negative stance towards it. Only after this does the Intake Officer initiate the activity of identifying the caller in order to establish or register her details on RESOLVE. Another example of this occurs in the extract below:

Extract 8. [232003: Disconnection Notice]

```
1    Con:   .hh welcome to the energy and water ombudsman
2           this is maria
3    Cal:   hi maria: I was wondering mi- if you'd be
4           able to help me .hhH I [hav]e just moved=
5                                  [°mm°]
```

```
6    Cal:   =into our property
7    Con:   .hh yeah
8    Cal:   a::nd I have received a disconnection notice
9           today and I've only had one payment?
10          (0.3)
11   Con:   sorry? you've only had one bill?
12   Cal:   o:h one payment from center-link (0.2) and
13          they've sending me out a disconnection
14          notice already (.) .hh and I mean (.) hullo
15          it's not the only bill what I've received
16          since what I've just moved in here
17          (0.2)
18   Con:   .H [okay]. who's your retailer
```

This request mirrors the one above in its actual construction and in its uptake by the Intake Officer: the request is again ambivalent about what it is about, and a continuer is again deployed which signals the relevance to the caller of doing further telling. And as the caller goes about adding further details it is again apparent that the Intake Officer is orienting to identifying the matter as relevant *before* initiating their first institutional action, which in this case involves determining the retailer at line 18. It is the Intake Officer's turn at line 11 that serves as the clearest evidence for this. This turn locates a problem with the caller's prior utterance and notably replaces 'payment' with 'bill' as the Intake Officer offers a candidate understanding of the matter the caller describes. The Intake Officer is working to establish an understanding of the matter as being relevant *before* embarking on the institutional tasks required to develop a complaint.

It is apparent then that opening formulations as requests result in a particular sequential organisation in call openings. If the caller positions the request *after* outlining the issue or problem that it relates to, then Intake Officers may move directly into initiating institutional tasks such as gathering details or mandatory field information. If however callers position a request itself as the initial formulation, or provide 'doing a request' as the reason for the call, then Intake Officers orient to the delivery of *further details* about the matter as a relevant next action for callers, and further talk is provided that the Intake Officer inspects for its relevance to making a complaint. This appears closely related to what Heritage and Clayman (2010) term 'gatekeeping', where institutional call takers assay callers' initial turns for their relevance to institutionally relevant tasks, although this was in the context of emergency calls where 'opening the gates' involved an immediate commitment to assistance, commonly following some interrogative sequences of talk. Here, it appears that 'opening the gates' involves the introduction by Intake Officers of a turn at talk that begins an *institutional task*, and this is done only after the matter has been identified as relevant to the role of EWOV. It also appears to relate to Emmison and Danby's (2007)

discovery of a two-part structure for the reason for the call: a specifiable 'issue' and then some turn that works on that issue, for example callers saying they "don't know what to do" about it. In these calls, a request appears to be taken up by Intake Officers only when it is related to specific matters. As an initial formulation, requests appear to need additional information: 'doing requesting' needs to be specified to 'requesting *about x*'. I move now to discuss the analysis of calls where callers, instead of using some form of request as their initial formulation, instead provide a TCU that does some 'telling' about the matter, typically using particular lexical items to identify it.

'Telling' Formulations and their Uptake

Extract 9. [233004: High Bill Flatting]

```
1    Con:   goodmorning the office of the energy and
2           water ombudsman this is Miley
3    Cal:   Hi U:::::m
4           (0.8)
5    Cal:   I've just got a problem with my: (.)
6           gas account .h
7    Con:   okay. who's the provider
8    Cal:   AGL
9    Con:   okay ((typing)) so what I'll do is I'll
10          get some details from you. Have you called
11          our office before?
```

Extract 10. [232010: Hacking Cough]

```
1           ((loud, unwell-sounding coughing))
2    Con:   .hh good afternoon welcome to the office of
3           the energy and water ombudsman my name's
4           Maddock
5    Cal:   hi Maddock ah my name's Stanley (0.3) u:m
6           I've got a bit of a problem with a couple
7           of power companies
8    Con:   okay .[hh a]- have you been in contact=
9    Cal:         [okay]
10   Con:   =with our office before
```

Both of the extracts above demonstrate similar initial formulations of the matter as a problem. Notably in each case this is prefaced by lexical terms – hedges – which work to minimise that problem: 'just' and 'a bit of', respectively. Lastly, and importantly, each of these formulations ends with specific information that is hearably relevant to the institution itself: a gas account and power companies, respectively. In each case this form of initial construction is immediately taken up by the Intake Officer, indicated by their launching of institutionally relevant activities instead of continuers, as in two of the previous request extracts. Clearly, initial formulations that categorise the matter as a 'problem' and that further work to categorise at least the 'type' of problem are

identifiable to Intake Officers as institutional business and they move into tasks related to registering the complaint. Callers initial formulations that eschew the term 'problem' but are still delivered in a 'telling' package can also be taken up by Intake Officers beginning to register the complaint, instead of issuing continuers that indicate more information is required:

Extract 11. [219008: Multiple Sclerosis]

```
1    Con:    good afternoon energy and water ombudsman this is
2            sian speaking
3    Cal:    yes hi. My name is luke (.) u:m (.) ringing ah like
4            sort of with respects to: um .hh my dealings with New
5            Energy
6    Con:    mmkay e- regarding the elec- (.) electricity was it?
7    Cal:    um both (.) elect[ricity and gas]       [a-  a-]
8    Con:                     [°okay° and gas] okay [.hh  ] yep? let
9            me take your detai:ls what's your surname
```

In this extract, the called-about matter is labelled by the caller as their 'dealings'. 'Dealings' as a term is not immediately hearable as connoting negative or problematic matters. However, this term is only deployed after some considerable hedging: 'like sort of with respects to'. In addition (and while this may seem obvious it is important) the caller also explicitly identifies the company in question. This at least renders the matter relevant to EWOV's role and its jurisdiction. The hedging, as in the previous examples ('just' and 'a bit of') may serve to mitigate or lesson the claimed severity of the to-be-announced issue—although that issue itself is not given a negative referent. Nonetheless this turn is treated by the Intake Officer as warranting the initiation of a complaint file. It may be that hedging, and identifying institutionally relevant *entities* (the company) are sufficient for initial formulations to be taken-up as indicating a complainable matter or complaint by Intake Officers.

This analysis of initial complaint formulations has identified two practices deployed by callers: making a request for some form of institutional assistance, or delivering a small 'telling' that uses some terms to categorize the matter. The analysis revealed that when callers request without first announcing what the request is about, Intake Officers issue continuers that serve to orient the caller to producing more talk – more detail – about the matter. Intake officers then inspect this and appear to issue institutionally relevant responses to callers talk when caller 'tellings' are identifiable as relevant to EWOV's role. In the case of initial formulations as 'tellings', Intake Officers in each case used their first turn to begin activities relevant to registering a complaint. In no case were callers' initial formulations taken up by Intake Officers as requiring

further detail, or talk. This suggests that callers' initial formulations are inspected for their relevance. Where there is insufficient detail, the interaction develops such that they produce more detail, until the point where the matter itself is recognisable to the Intake Officer as apparently relevant to the institutional business, and the marker for this recognition is that these Officers produce turns at talk that orient to institutional tasks. These findings are robust across the sample, however there was one consistent variation from this: callers who identified themselves as return callers, ones who had previously contacted EWOV. In these calls, callers would systematically depart from the practices described above. Their initial formulations were consistently positioned *after* some TCU that identified the caller as a repeat caller, or as a caller that had previously dealt with the institution. Instead of deploying some turn at talk or TCU that provided a formulation for the trouble, these callers would instead launch directly into the activity of providing the *details* of the matter in a narrative form. No announcements, or formulations, were provided. In addition, Intake Officers appeared to treat these narratives in a different way, launching activities that, reliably, worked to secure the callers' identities on the RESOLVE program. I now present extracts and their analysis below.

Returning Callers

Extract 12. [219011: Kids Shower]

```
1    Con:    .hh good afternoon energy and water ombudsman this
2            is Yarn speaking
3    Cal:    hi this is um Sarah Bishopton .hh um I rang up (0.2)
4            um (.) I think it was a week and a half ago .hh
5            about um (0.2) my electricity being cut off (.) and
6            I got some help with that .h but yesterday um
7            they've done the same thing (0.2) origin energy
8            have done the same thing that they did with the
9            electricity (.) with my gas? .hh yesterday? .hh and
10           I've rang them back up yesterday and they told me
11           um (0.4) I'm only on a single parenting payment
12           pension .h and they've told me I need to pay um
13           (0.2) six hundred dollars (.) before they can
14           reconnect it? .hh no[w I-]
15   Con:                        [okay] sorry you-
16   Cal:    I can't give my (.) do- my kids a shower or
17   Con:    .hh so they've done this (0.2) hha- u:m a[m I]=
18   Cal:                                            [ha-]
19   Con:    =speaking with Sarah Bishopton of Delaware?
20   Cal:    yes t[hat]'s right
```

In this example the caller opens with her name and then proceeds to announce that she is a returning caller: she has previously contacted EWOV. What follows is clearly an

extended turn at talk that performs a telling, and this telling accomplishes several things. Firstly, the caller accounts for her previous contact with EWOV and what this was in the service of doing, namely getting help for an electricity matter. The caller then moves to describe, in some detail, what the current called-about-issue is, a gas disconnection. In the entire collection of calls, this was by far the largest opening turn by any caller and the most detailed explication of the reason for the call. A close examination of the Intake Officer's turn at lines 17-19 reveals how the caller's earlier identification of herself (by name) and as a returning caller enables this. The Intake Officer has clearly already located the caller in the RESOLVE system, and is able to identify her more specifically through her location. That successful identification reveals that the caller's details are already on the system and both speakers may forego details-gathering as an activity. Removing that institutional imperative appears, in this case, to allow the caller more space to account for the details of the matter, as specifying these is still a critical task for the interaction. Identifying as a return caller, then, has important implications for call openings, with the possibility that successful identifications – ones that are located on RESOLVE – result in more detailed and elaborate initial formulations of the problem as the Intake Officer orients to details of the *matter*, not the *caller.* A good example a contrast case is provided below. Here the caller does claim returning caller status, however the Intake Officer is not successful in identifying him on the system and the shape of the opening is altered.

Extract 13. [233006: Sciatica.]

```
1    Con:   good afternoon office of the energy and water
2           ombudsman this is miley
3           (0.2)
4    Cal:   ha- wha'd you say your n-name was again?
5    Con:   miley
6    Cal:   miley. .hh ah look miley look I-I rang about
7           a=a:w bit over a month ago
8    Con:   okay
9    Cal:   in regar- aw I forget the lady's name I was
10          talking to I- I've rung quite a few times actually
11          to do with AGL
12   Con:   ok[ay]
13   Cal:     [an]' I got a bit of trouble with them in the
14          pa:st
15   Con:   do you have a case reference number at all?
16   Cal:   a::h no I-I look (0.4) what's actually happened
17          is I've got two young boys hh I'v[e ]been very=
18   Con:                                   [I-]
19   Cal:   =ill and ah .h I'm a single parent ah one
20          kid's been hit by a ca:r and I go- I got a b-
21          ah lot of problems rig[ht and I]-
22   Con:                         [okay wel]l how about I
23          see if I can find a case that may have been
24          re[ferenced °before you°] explain it
```

```
25  Cal:    [o k a y  a : : h]
```

The caller identifies themself as a return caller at lines 6-7, however they do not provide any specific identifying information, including their name (interestingly an adjacency pair occurs immediately before this turn where the caller asks the Intake Officer's name, a practice identified by Sacks (1992) that commonly resulted in callers not providing their own). The Intake Officer receipts his identification with a continuing "okay" (line 8), and as in the previous example, the caller orients first to providing information relating to his *previous* contact(s) with EWOV instead of the reason for the current call. It is at line 15 that the Intake Officer produces a question designed to secure the specific identity of the caller—callers who register case are assigned a case reference number, which is later mailed to them in the post along with the details of their case and the dispute resolution process. The caller responds on the negative and then, as in the previous example, moves to begin the actual telling or narrative of the matter. We can see the Intake Officer attempting to speak at line 18, and then at 22 she is able to produce a full turn at talk. This turn clearly illustrates her preference for the locating the caller within the RESOLVE database *before* any activities directed towards the details of the matter itself.

These examples of the opening turns of returning callers reveal practices that are markedly different from first time callers. These callers initially identify (with more or less specificity) as returning callers and then move to what they had previously contacted EWOV about. From there, they orient to moving directly into delivering complaint narratives, detailed accounts of the matter, instead of initial formulations of it. That is, they move directly into complaining instead of outlining the reason for the call. Whether they are able to move into this successfully appears to depend on whether the Intake Officer was able to identify them on the RESOLVE system from their initial introduction. Callers that are identified successfully are able to move into the business of complaining, whereas those that are not find their complaining halted as the Intake Officer moves back into the project of establishing their identity within the RESOLVE database.

Conclusions

This chapter has identified several practices in callers' initial formulations of the reason for the call, and has commented on the reasons for this. Firstly, callers who introduce their reason for the call as doing enquiring do so explicitly, and this activity is

oriented to by Intake Officers as doing some form of telling. Instead of moving to gather details about the caller or the matter itself, Intake Officers issue continuers or questions that show their orientation to a story-recipient role, and callers proceed to narrate events accordingly. That initial project can be overturned however if Intake Officers recognize the narrated events as being possibly relevant to a complaint, in which case they move to initiate institutional tasks, such as details-gathering.

The initial formulations of complaints depart from enquiries in that callers do not explicitly identify complaining as the reason for the call. Instead there appear to be two types of formulation here, each with its own particular sequential outcome. Callers who identify requests for assistance as the reason for the call then move into the activity of 'telling' about matters, usually following some continuer from the Intake Officer. Such tellings proceed up to a point where the activity shifts as the Intake Officer moves to introduce some institutional task, such as registering the details of the caller. However if callers identify a trouble or issue and *then* issue a request for assistance as the reason for the call then this can be immediately taken up by Intake Officers as they move into particular institutional tasks, without the provision of any further details from the caller. This practice aligns closely with Emmison and Danby's (2007) finding of a two-part opening sequence by caller to a kids help line: details of the matter were required *as well as* the provision of some reason for the call, before the initiation of institutionally relevant tasks by call takers. The other type of formulation of complaints were announcements. These again had certain shared features. Callers would precede the lexical item they used for the called-about matter ('problem', 'dealings', 'trouble') with hedges such as 'just' and 'a bit'. Secondly these initial formulations included at least some detail regarding the matter itself, for example by identifying the complaint category as gas, or naming the company in question. An important finding here was that lexical terms could be used that did not illustrate a negative caller stance to the matter, and these formulations were just as readily taken up by Intake Officers as complaints as were initial formulations that did demonstrate a negative caller stance. It appeared that institutional relevance trumps caller stance in the case of identifying caller formulations as relevant complaints that warrant institutional attention.

Lastly it was found that returning callers did not produce initial problem formulations. Instead these callers would initially identify as return callers, then move into accounting for their previous contact with EWOV, and then move directly into complaining, or narrating the details of the current issue. Whether they were able to do

so appeared to depend on whether Intake Officers were able to identify them on the RESOLVE system before or during their move into narration.

The analysis of caller openings and their uptake reveals variable practices in this important activity. As the previous chapter showed, complaints to EWOV are a very particular phenomenon. They are not just 'expressions of dissatisfaction' but rather are a series of activities that eventually result in the accomplishment of a complaint, and this usually represents the beginning of the dispute resolution process. The investigation of callers' initial formulations in call openings reveals that they may orient to complaining (or enquiring) in ways that do not always square with these institutional procedures. Despite the different practices, in each case it appeared that callers' initial formulations eventually came to be aligned to the project of the Intake Officer, whether that was gathering details of the caller or of the matter itself, although alignment could in some cases occur quite far from the caller's initial formulation of the matter. When participants do come to align it represents a major accomplishment. While the activities of Intake Officers and the infrastructure of their complaint handling system are remarkable achievements in themselves, they are redundant without the input from callers, callers who in the initial stages of the exchange are usually unaware of EWOV's systems and protocols, and instead have their own understanding of how their complaint or enquiry will be, or should be, brought off. Again, I return to the central premises of this thesis to explain the significance of this: there are multiple versions of this activity called complaining, in each conversation there are at least two—the institutional version of the Intake Officer and the version of the caller. Appreciating this requires an eschewal of unitary definitions of the practice and the focus instead on how it may vary in its actual performance, and by identifying that variation one is able to develop a more accurate and useful grasp of the behaviour. If entities wish to improve complaint handling, then understanding its sequential and dyadic nature, and how it may be understood differently by callers/consumers, should surely be integral to any developments attempted.

Chapter Five:

The Advantages of Disadvantage: Caller Self-Disclosure in Complaint Narratives

- "O, woe is me!

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1).

This chapter offers an analysis of a recurrent practice deployed by callers in their complaint narratives delivered to EWOV Intake Officers; that of self-disclosure. Throughout the process of listening to, transcribing, and analysing the complaint narratives in the data corpus, it became apparent that callers would frequently provide the Intake Officers with what may be deemed (or that was hearable as) personal information regarding themselves or their significant others, particularly their families. Following the procedure outlined more extensively in the methodology section, a collection of this phenomena (n=7) was established and subjected to formal analysis. It is the purpose of this chapter to offer an analysis of these data with an eye to accounting for the possible reasons for its use in complaining – its functions – and for the way that is taken up in interaction. In addition the chapter seeks to challenge current psychological understandings of this phenomenon and offer an alternative conceptualisation. In line with Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar (2005), it is argued here that self disclosure is best understood (and analysed) as a situated, contextually-bound practice, one that may not be divorced from both the immediate and more distal interpersonal exigencies which inform its performance by individuals. More broadly, self-disclosure is theorised as being a critical part of impression management, specifically, in the case of the present data, an impression geared towards a broad social category of 'disadvantage'. This places this squarely in the realm of Discursive Psychology, as an existing psychological phenomenon and its attendant theoretical explanations are reconceptualised based on the way that self-disclosure is mobilised as an apparent resource in conversation. The chapter commences with a review of extant literature regarding self-disclosure and its contemporary understanding.

Self-Disclosure Review

As both a practice and a concept, self-disclosure has had a robust presence in both psychological and communication research literature for the last five decades.

Surprisingly its formal conceptualisation has altered little, illustrated by a serial offering of definitions in papers regarding the phenomenon;

"The process of making the self known to other persons" (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958).

"That which occurs when A knowingly communicates to B information about A which is not generally known and is not otherwise available to B" (Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969).

"The revelation of previously contained facts in terms of the individual transmission of information heretofore unknown to the recipient" (Macmartin, 1999).

These definitions attest to the key criteria of the practice. It involves communication of some type, the information communicated relates to the communicator, and the recipient of the communication does not have prior access to the information communicated. A more interaction-oriented definition, one appropriate to the present analysis will be outlined presently, however before this a brief review of the extant approaches to self-disclosure is offered.

The machinations and implications of the process vary considerably depending on the lens through which it is investigated and reported. From a humanistic and therapeutic point of view it is held generally to be a positively-valued behaviour associated with a well-adapted personality (e.g Jourard, 1971) and with beneficial outcomes in psychotherapeutic contexts (e.g Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). From the viewpoint of social psychology self-disclosure is generally investigated as a factor in a range of both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. For example, as an integral and revelatory part in an operating 'norm of reciprocity' (Davis and Skinner, 1974; Worthy, Gary and Kahn, 1968), or as a dependent variable which is contingent upon internal 'person' factors such as self-monitoring (Ludwig, Franco and Malloy 1986), or interpersonal flexibility and empathy (Neimeyer and Bankiotes, 1981). 'Situation' variables have additionally been investigated in terms of their impact on self-disclosure. Studies utilising this approach have found, for example, that individuals self-disclose more frequently in anonymous computer-mediated communication than they do when they are visibly identifiable by a co-interactant (Joinson, 2001), while in counselling sessions, an "architecturally soft" interior design of the room is elicits more self-disclosure than an "architecturally hard" design (Chaiken, Derlega, & Miller, 1976). Incorporated into the canon of literature on self-disclosure have also been motivational

aspects that present antecedents to its use. Kaplan (1986) discusses 'self referent behaviour' as being motivated in part by a "goal of positive self-evaluation", while Derlega and Chaiken (1977) find self-disclosure to be a key factor in the validation of one's self-concept through the understanding of significant love and friendship relationship partners. More recently, self-disclosure as a practice has been associated with theories of impression management (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). As a school of thought this directs theoretical focus away from a stable reading of identity and 'self' toward more interaction-oriented, social notions of these concepts, a stance which is, ostensibly at least, strongly related to the types of analysis presented here.

Impression Management and Self-Disclosure

Impression management "consists of any behaviour by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others" (Tedeschi and Riess, 1981, p.3). As a field of research, it lists as theoretical forebears Cooley's (1902) 'Looking Glass Self', Mead's (1934) socially-formed "I" and "Me" self, and of course Goffman's (1959) performed, dramaturgical self—these concepts sharing a thematic thread in their elevation of social interaction to an ascendant position in the formation, development and 'performance' of a particular self. Closely related to impression management is the concept of self presentation. Self presentation is distinguished from impression management in its focus; while an individual may work to 'manage the impression' of a person's group or idea, using means other than direct communication (Schneider, 1981) self presentation takes as its subject only those behaviours which people personally deploy to control impressions of themselves (Schlenker, 2003; Schneider, 1981). Extending from Goffman's original explication of an individual "mobilize(ing) his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (1959, p.4), both impression management and self presentation position various *goals* as the core motivation for individuals' performance in these domains. For example goals may be based around increasing self esteem through acceptance and praise from others (Schlenker, 2003) or instrumental outcomes relating to the context an interaction occurs in or the target person a presentation is geared towards (Kaplan, 1986; Schlenker, 2003). Goals, then, are conceptualised by researchers as critical guides to 'unravelling' individuals' self-presentation oriented behaviour.

In addition to goals, researchers have provided a lengthy taxonomy of strategies which individuals use to 'do' self presentation and impression management. It seems readily apparent that self-disclosure must necessarily be an integral cog in this interpersonal machinery, as it encapsulates a critical 'building block' of the process; communicating information about oneself. While not termed 'self-disclosure' in the literature, research, both practical and theoretical, has been put forward which seeks to categorise how such 'communication' is done. In their review of self-disclosure as a verbal practice, Ignatius and Kokkonen (2007) describe six; individuals may offer *self descriptions* which emphasise positive aspects of the self, *accounts* which serve to 'alleviate' predicaments, *apologies* which distance a 'true self' from a negative occurrence, *entitlements and enhancements* which associate the self with a desirable event or outcome, *flattery* where others are complimented in order to enhance an individual's likeability, and *favours* which are the performance of positive behaviours toward others. In addition to these, Schlenker (2003) cites studies which find that stories and accounts based on memory can be organized to make them compatible with some current goal of the teller (Baumeister, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1988, in Schlenker, 2003). Finally, further, similar strategies are ingratiation (Jones, 1964), intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication (Jones and Pittman, 1982). Supplication involves an individual emphasizing their "dependence or weakness to obtain help from powerful others, who are bound by norms of social responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves" (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981, p.11).

From this brief review it should be apparent that through an abundance of studies a vast descriptive account of self-disclosure, impression management and self presentation has been developed. These studies are, in the main, housed squarely within the 'factors and variables' research approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Despite their elevation of social interaction as the primary locus of the 'doing' of the concepts, the majority of the investigations are laboratory bound affairs which attempt to 'isolate' variables of interest and 'control' potential threats to validity. What is needed in this field is a more naturalistic approach where the functions, practices and strategies of self-disclosure, and its relationship to self-presentation and impression management, may be investigated as an individual's own practice. To explicate the perennial raison d'être of Discursive Psychological and Conversation Analytic work, we need to understand how self-disclosure is occasioned, managed, and brought off in actual interaction. And if it does relate to self-presentation or impression management in doing complaining, then

this too needs to be evidenced by the speakers and hearers *themselves* within the interaction itself.

It is at this point a fresh 'working definition' may be put forward for the present analysis. Antaki et al. (2005) have offered a discursive reading of self-disclosure as an occasioned, situated practice which could not be divorced from the contexts of its production. In a helpful reconceptualisation, they set three features out which he established as 'patterned' within the examples of the practice he analysed. These were that self-disclosures are action-performative and relevant to the exigencies of the situation, volunteered by speakers, and lastly related to something the speaker has sole 'rights to know' in the interaction (Antaki et al., 2005). Recall: the research goal of this chapter is an account as to how callers deploy self-disclosure in the service of constructing an event as a complainable matter. To this end the practice must be assessed in terms of the actions it performs (immediate and distal), the location of the utterance, common features between the examples, and the interactional implications of their production. The analysis proceeds by examining two extended complaint narratives, and then two somewhat briefer instances. Before beginning however it is important to note something particular about EWOV itself and its institutional 'attitude' to complaining.

EWOV: Role and Process

A key activity in calls is the explanation of the role and process of EWOV. Below is an example of this.

Extract 1. [233001: Handwritten Bill, p. 4]
```
26   Con:   okay well look I'll let you know exactly what our
27          role is here and what we can hopefully do
28          to assi[st yo]u
29   Cal:        [right]
30   Con:   .h so our role here at the ombudsman is to
31          investigate complaints between customers and their
32          energy and water providers
33   Cal:   mhm
34   Con:   .h so we're an independent body? (.) so we don't act
35          on your behalf or on [beh]alf of Genesis energy .h=
36   Cal:                        [no:]
37   Con:   =um but we are here to conciliate a fair and
38          reasonable outcome for both parties
39   Cal:   rig[ht]
```

The role and process explanation of EWOV is an important activity for Intake Officers and it occurs in all calls. The activity itself represents the discursive production of a

central tenet of EWOV itself—it is an *independent* body not beholden to either the commercial entities it regulates or the consumers whose complaints and enquiries it receives. This aspect of the function of EWOV was also discussed in interviews. Here is an extract of the interview with Sian.

> **[Interview 1. Sian. P. 6]**
> **The last question just relates to EWOV's policy of independence, and you as the Intake Officer being independent in calls. Do you find it's difficult?**
> No. Not at all really. Because I know what EWOV's role is and why I'm here, from the start you know they drill in "independence independence independence" so it was quite easy for me to sort of just step back and just do my job really. Sometimes we'll get cases where you really feel for the customer but you just can't say anything. And customers will often try and make you agree with them or say something, anything, to make you agree with them, but you know to look out for those sorts of triggers, but that's not difficult for me. I mean you're allowed to have your thoughts, but not say them to the customer.

Sian's account of the policy of independence and the way this is manifested in calls illustrates the importance attached to the practice. It also highlights how this may be challenged by callers, as *'customers will often try and make you agree with them'*. In enacting the policy of independence, Intake Officers are institutionally bound to avoid affiliating with callers, or demonstrating support for their particular stance on the matter (Stivers, 2008), and this must be enacted even when callers appear to quite explicitly attempt to secure this. In the following examples this needs to be borne in mind, as while it seems quite palpable that through self-disclosing the caller is often attempting to secure some form of affiliation, this is rarely demonstrated by Intake Officers, due to this aspect of how EWOV handles complaints. I want to make it very clear that by not affiliating, Intake Officers are not demonstrating indifference. Some of these extracts see callers presenting an almost Dickensian reality of hardship, however it is not the case that this hardship is ignored. There *are* ways of helping that are enacted by EWOV, as they go about securing, for example, concessions, rebates, and payment plans for these callers. It is just that these helping actions occur outside the conversations between intake Officers and callers. With this established, I turn now to the analysis of first complaint narrative of the chapter.

Self-Disclosure in Complaint Narratives

Extract 2. [219008. Multiple Sclerosis, pp 1-2.]

```
44   Con:   (typing) 'ka:y (0.6) .hhh okay so what are your concerns?
45   Cal:   ah my conce:rns are that they um ahh- nothing that
46          they've done wrong other than provide a shocking ah
47          service I mean .hh I-have never and I don't know how
48          genuine this: er complaint would be .hh ah I-I-I was
49          a senior manager in my past life ah (0.2) I suffer from
1    Cal:   M.S? (0.2) I struggle to: talk for a: l-longer period of
2           time? (0.2) [I  ha]ve been on the telephone for (.) exactly=
3    Con:               [°aha°]
4    Cal:   =one hour
5    Con:   mhm
6    Cal:   and I have gotten absolutely nowhere [u:m ]and .hh the=
7    Con:                                        [okay]
8    Cal:   =assistant when I ring not the most user friendly .hh
9           then I ring up hh [ th]ey said no wrong department=
10   Con:                     [.hh]
11   Cal:   =w- we'll put you through (0.4) I better explain the
12          whole story (.) they put me through (0.2) .hh nope
13          wrong department I explained the whole story (.) I get
14          some person up in india somewhere (0.2) struggling to
15          understand what I'm saying (0.2) I(h)'m trying to get
16          um some assistance with (.) the payments on my (.)
17          both of the accounts they are both behind we are
18          struggling financially .hh a(h)nd that I (0.2) struggle
19          to (.) get much work and I struggle to generate an income
20          with my illness (0.2) um and then um in the end he just
21          hung up
22   Con:   (typing)
23   Cal:   a[n-]
24   Con:    [ok]ay .hh so you- are you seeking a payment plan?
25   Cal:   ah I am I I was on one and I defaulted due to the
26          fact (0.2) that (0.2) you know I get (0.4) enough
27          money to keep every]one]
28   Con:                      [mhm] (0.2) .hh so how much of a payment
29          plan were you on
30   Cal:   um (.) I mean that's not so much an issue six dollars
31          a week
32   Con:   mhm
```

This extract presents the initiation of the complaint narrative. The Intake Officer's turn at line 44 signals the beginning of this activity as she invites the caller to present his concerns. The caller depicts the receipt of 'shocking service' as the subject of the complaint. Importantly, as the turn develops he himself questions the legitimacy of this matter as warranting a complaint (lines 47-48), but then follows this up by issuing a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991), the items of which are in the service of self-disclosure. Firstly he discloses his previous occupation, then that he has multiple sclerosis, and lastly a specific symptom of the illness—he "*struggles to talk for a longer period of time"*. Each item of the list is followed by a pause, and the final two items are marked by questioning intonation. It would be a mistake to assume that these pauses are provided for the Intake Officer to respond, however. As Jefferson (1991) has noted

three-part lists are oriented-to by both speakers and hearers as a normative procedure for listing, that is, that three parts *should* be included in a list, rendering any interjection by a hearer as possibly interruptive, something that may hinder the progressivity of the talk. And so note that the Intake Officer's response (line 3) occurs (in overlap) *after* the third item has been delivered. The actual outcome of the self-disclosing list is the upshot, specifically how the latter two items relate to what comes. The caller has been on the phone for "*exactly one hour*", and this is recognizably problematic as his multiple sclerosis makes this difficult—a struggle. The matter itself then, the waiting on the phone, is able to be cast as a negative event thanks to the personal information provided in the previous self-disclosures. As the literature review noted, a central task of complaint narratives is to render the event itself as negative, as a transgression of some moral order (Drew, 1998). Here, the self-disclosures provided in the list manage to accomplish this, and this is all the more striking considering the caller himself, earlier in the narrative, questions the actual legitimacy of the matter as justifying a complaint. A final point concerns how this information is taken up by the Intake Officer. *"Aha"* at line 3 and *"mhm"* at line 5 both function as continuers, demonstrating the Intake Officer's orientation to a story-recipient role in the interaction and also signalling to the caller that they may continue with the production of the narrative (Schegloff, 2007). Importantly, neither turn serves to mark the disclosed information as warranting sympathy or indignation or anything of this sort. They are directed not to these concerns but rather to the actual activity of 'telling', the relevant activity for this particular point in the call where the details of the matter are reported and recorded in the RESOLVE program.

The next instance of self-disclosure in this extract occurs in lines 17-20. The caller has been directing his narrative towards an account of the problematic service he has received during the phone call to the company concerned. At line 16 the caller reveals the purpose of this phone call: negotiating some plan with the company that allows him to receive assistance on the payment of his gas and electricity accounts, which are behind. Following this the caller delivers another three-part list, the items of which recognizably disclose personal information. In this case, the caller reveals a troubled financial position, and his struggle to secure work and to generate an income. In the final item (19-20) the illness itself is positioned as the cause of this struggle. At the end of the turn the caller describes how the call-taker of this company 'hung up'. The self-disclosures in this turn appear to perform similar work to those in the previous

one. The disclosed-information allows for the recognition of the upshot (the hanging up) as a moral transgression, as something that is clearly a negative act that may warrant an official complaint. These self-disclosures also provide for a particular identity-claim on the part of the caller as he categorises himself as economically disadvantaged. Whereas in the previous list the self-disclosures related quite specifically to the spending an hour on the phone and how this was problematic, here they do further work, by making available a particular social category and placing the speaker squarely within this category. In addition, the dire economic position of the caller is intertwined with his illness. The two do not exist independently, rather the illness has *caused* the financial trouble: *"I struggle to generate an income with my illness"*. What is the function of this, and does it indicate some self-presentation strategy on the part of the caller? Parson's (1951) Sick Role provides an interesting reference to this question. Within this framework illness is attended by particular social exemptions, particularly when the illness is severe, due to the understanding that illness is unforeseeable and uninvited. In light of this the caller's linkage of the struggle to generate money with the illness is logical and, in the theory of Parson's, possibly strategic in the sense that a hearer of such a claim would be socially bound to accept its validity—to affiliate with the claim and to offer some form of sympathy or support. This may be put to the test here by inspecting the way that these self-disclosures are taken up by the Intake Officer. At line 24 she offers a turn that responds to the caller's previous telling. This turn does not evince sympathy or support or endorsement of the claims of the caller. Instead it is directed towards something institutionally relevant: is the caller seeking to secure a payment plan with the company in question? If the self-disclosures in the previous turn have made available some category of disadvantage, and located the caller within that category, and if they perhaps are strategic in the sense that they seek affiliation and social support through invoking shared understandings of socio-cultural norms surrounding illness, then this is not immediately evinced in the conversation itself. The question about the payment plan *is* a prelude to a particular from of help—the Intake Officer will note in the report that the caller requires a payment plan to be set up in order to pay back his arrears. Yet this help is not particularly exceptional or specialized to this particular case. Establishing payment plans is a common solution to caller complaints (EWOV Annual Report, 2010) and thus is a routine institutional response. In this sense, if the self-disclosures were strategic in that they *did* serve to secure affiliation from the Intake Officer, this is able to be resisted through the performance of

established and routine institutional tasks. It is taken up not as a personal matter, or as a social matter, but as an institutional one. I now present another, later extract from this call that also demonstrates self-disclosure.

Extract 3. [219008: Multiple Sclerosis, p. 3]

```
10   Con:   (typing) .hh (0.2) so then you called was it today to talk
11          to them about establishing another payment plan?
12   Cal:   ah yes I've been on the phone since u:m a-  [    ah] three=
13   Con:                                              [typing]
14   Cal:   =so (.) one hour
15   Cal:   .hhh
16          (0.4)
17   Cal:   and then then I get another girl this afternoon I said
18          can I have the omb-man's ah cellphone number she finally
19          found it (0.2) said do you not have a customer relations
20          department where I can ring and just sort of (.) press
21          my concerns about people hangin' up (0.4) a-nd a n-not
22          understanding what one's saying
23   Con:   (typing) (1.2)
24   Cal:   just repeating myself I've never in my li:fe I mean I had
25          a hundred and eighty staff when I was healthy (0.5) and
26          everyone was just professional as and .hh here's ah
27          people wh(h)o are the rudest er- (.) whatever .h (0.2)
28          and then struggle like to communicate with people as if
29          I'm ringing someone on mars
30   Con:   (typing)
31   Cal:   ((Guilt oss))
32   Con:   ka:y .hh so what are you seeking as a resolution to this?
33   Cal:   well I just would like someone o- to to ring me I don't
34          want my electricity and gas disconnected [whic]h it's=
35   Con:                                            [mhmm]
```

This extract presents the continuation of the complaint narrative. This aspect of the telling is again initiated by the Intake Officer, as in line 10 she issues a question related to the specific matter, the caller's previous conversation with his energy company regarding assistance in establishing a payment plan. The caller offers a detailed depiction of the issue, specifying the events with reference to the time taken, the individual that he spoke with, and the particular things that he said in this conversation, specifically how he requested to be connected to the customer relations department of the company. It is in his turn beginning at line 24 that the caller again employs self-disclosure. This time, the information he discloses relates to his professional experience. Recall in the first extract that this information, his former professional experience, formed the first item of that three-part list. Here we see the caller utilising that self-disclosure in the service of making the actual complaint. The caller contrasts his own experience regarding management and professional conduct *("I had one hundred and eighty staff", "everyone was professional as")* with the experience he has had with his energy company. He is explicit in his negative

evaluations here: the staff he has dealt with were *"the rudest"* and they *"struggle to communicate with people"*. His simile, comparing the experience to speaking to Martian beings, is similar to that practice identified by Drew and Holt (1988) where complainants may use idiomatic expressions to provide evaluative upshots at terminal stages of complaint narratives. Of interest here however is the way that the self-disclosure is positioned prior to these condemnatory evaluations. The self-disclosure of his previous expertise may serve to position the caller in a position of epistemic authority, effectively earning him the right to make such evaluations and making those evaluations themselves hearable as being valid. The way the staff at the energy company have behaved is clearly depicted as being below par in this turn because it doesn't meet the expectations, derived through experience, of a former manager and expert. In this sense, self-disclosure functions as a device that manages to accomplish negative evaluations in complaint narratives, and to do so in a way that positions the self-discloser as a discerning and informed judge. Following this, the Intake Officer again issues no signal that this evaluation is supported or endorsed: she does not affiliate with the caller's stance. Instead she acknowledges the turn itself with *"kay"* (Beach, 1993) and then proceeds with further institutionally relevant business: identifying what the caller seeks as a form of resolution for the matter. As in the previous examples, the Intake Officer's response to the turn containing the self-disclosure orients to institutional matters, and does not affiliate nor demonstrate any particular stance towards the matter whatsoever. In the final extract from this call, presented below, we see the caller again invoking the information he has previously disclosed, and this time in dramatic circumstances.

Extract 4. [219008: Multiple Sclerosis, p. 6]

```
21   Con:   .hh and the gas reference number i:s g (0.8) two double
22          zero nine (0.6) .hh nine two (0.6) eight nine
23   Cal:   hang on I just have to collapse h .HH alright hh thank you
24          very much I'll wait for the-
25          (0.4)
26   Con:   okay (0.2) are you alright?
27   Cal:   ah yeah I'm alright s'jus that I've been talking for
28          long and on the phone and it's warmed up and I(hh)- go
29          and have a lie down .hh
30   Con:   okay
31   Cal:   it's not easy having multiple sclero[sis] I've got two=
32   Con:                                       [no:]
33   Cal:   =degrees behind me and (.) I was a high flyer and then
34          hit a big brick wall Ha .hh
35   Con:   oohh:
36   Cal:   just life .hh alright then?
37   Con:   okay .hh alright um as I said if you need any further
38          assistance give us a call back
```

```
39   Cal:   °I will° thank you very much for your time and help
40   Con:   you're welcome thank you for your call
41   Cal:   bye bye
42   Con:   bye .hh
```

The talk in this extract occurs right at the very end of the call. All relevant business has been attended to and a complaint has been lodged in RESOLVE for forwarding to the company in question. At line 23 the caller makes the worrying assertion that he *"just has to collapse"*. He then continues this turn but cuts out abruptly. The Intake Officer at line 26 clearly demonstrates a strong sense of concern with this, asking if he is alright. After establishing with the Intake Officer that yes, he is alright, the caller goes on, in line 31, to offer one final series of references to the information he has disclosed throughout the call. Importantly, the Intake Officer does respond to these turns in an affiliative way. Firstly the caller offers an assessment of his illness *("it's not easy having multiple sclerosis")* that the Intake Officer aligns with at line 32. The caller then proceeds to refer back to his past successes *("two degrees behind me", "high flyer")* and then characterises his fall into illness with the idiom *"hit(ting) a big brick wall"*. The Intake Officer at this point issues a hearably sympathetic response, an extended 'oh' that serves to acknowledge the hardships of the caller and to commiserate with him. This is quite remarkable. As the first extract of this call demonstrated the caller has previously provided this information, although in the service of different activities. Here, it is quite overtly disclosed in the service of securing affiliation. The caller is perhaps (and his plight certainly seems to warrant it) indulging in some self pity, and the responses of the Intake Officer obliges him with sympathetic responses. Previously however her responses to the turns containing the self-disclosure were manifestly business-oriented as she sought to progress the conversation by invoking activities relevant to lodging complaints with EWOV. It is apparent that self-disclosure, in this call, is treated differently depending on its position in the call and the particular activities that it attends to. In the delivery of a complaint narrative it is taken up as just that: an aspect of the telling about a complainable event. Once this business has been accomplished, however, it is treated differently, in this case as information that warrants condolence. Relatedly, from the perspective of the speaker self-disclosure also varies in its function. Through the extracts we have seen it deployed in order to cast events as negative and transgressive acts, to claim epistemic authority in evaluating events, and to secure pity. Approaching self-disclosure as an indexical and situated practice has enabled this.

The next conversation that further illustrates the practice is presented below. In this interaction, the caller again claims a medical affliction, as well as a range of other unfortunate circumstances. In the first extract, the caller is moving into the complaint narrative itself near the beginning of the call.

Extract 5. [233006: Sciatica, p. 1]

```
15   Con:   do you have a case reference number at all?
16   Cal:   a::h no I-I look (0.4) what's actually happened
17          is I've got two young boys hh I'v[e ]been very=
18   Con:                                    [I-]
19   Cal:   =ill and ah .h I'm a single parent ah one
20          kid's been hit by a ca:r and I go- I got a b-
21          ah lot of problems rig[ht and I]-
22   Con:                         [okay wel]l how about I
23          see if I can find a case that may have been
24          re[ferenced °before you°] explain it
25   Cal:     [o  k  a  y   a : : h]
```

This extract occurs in the opening stages of the call after the caller has informed the Intake Officer that they have previously called the institution (see the previous chapter for an analysis of this). In the turn beginning at line 16 the caller moves into the narrative itself *("what's actually happened is")*. He then offers a series of self-disclosing utterances, informing the Intake Officer about his family situation, his status as a solo parent, his illness, a recent negative event, and a final disclosure that claims *"a lot of problems"*. The position of these self-disclosures serves to illustrate their function. The speaker uses them to introduce his complaint narrative itself, and yet none of the statements is recognizably related to the business of EWOV, to matters concerning energy or water provision. The events depicted in the self-disclosures are not, in the institutional sense, 'what has actually happened'. Rather, the speaker deploys these utterances to prepare the ground for the delivery of the relevant, complainable events. And he appears to do this in a manner that is specifically directed towards the Intake Officer. The evidence for this comes in the form of the discourse marker 'right' which comes directly after the final self-disclosure. The deployment of this serves an interpersonal function as the caller signals to the Intake Officer that the particular activity, the listing of self-disclosing information, is over and the narrative itself will progress (Schiffrin, 1988). The caller moves to make this progression, however the Intake Officer manages to obtain the floor and to produce her own turn, which orients instead to the task of identifying the caller within the RESOLVE system. This indicates a strong sensitivity on the part of the caller to the way that his talk is received. Deploying 'right' in the point where he does indicates a concern that the previous

activity, the self-disclosing, is identified and recognized as a relevant part of the narrative, one that he may proceed from. This indicates a further use for self-disclosure in complaint narratives—it may be used in order to provide preliminary information, or to 'set the scene' for what is to come. In the extract below we rejoin this conversation as the complaint narrative itself is in full production, following the identification of the caller in the RESOLVE system. In this extract, we see that some of the information disclosed in the introduction to the narrative comes to be related to the specific matter itself.

Extract 6. [233006: Sciatica, pp. 3-4]

```
44   Con:      [sorry]
45   Cal:      =sent me another one now r- (.) requesting another
46             hundred and thirty five dollars eighty seven
47             or somethin[g yo]u know?
48   Con:                 [okay]
49   Con:      so now way[ne]
50   Cal:                [s']like they're double billing me .hh
51             I I think I may have ha- look (0.4) a-ah it seems
52             as-s as though that you need to keep your
53             receipts because um (0.2) .hh you know if you
1              lose track of things y- and you get another
2              bill? you go in you- you just pay it you know
3              and ah I just pay over the ah counter and if you
4              lose track of things because I'm .hh I'm on
5              a large amount of painkillers
6    Cal:      right?
7    Cal:      .hh I'm ah suffering chronic pain and I'm I'm
8              on a large quantity of morphine and stuff like
9              that for the pain
10   Cal:      .hh and it's very very hard you know I- I lose
11             track of things
12   Con:      mm[m]
13   Cal:        [v]ery easily
14   Cal:      an[d    a]:h
15   Con:        [alright]
16   Cal:      .hh you know wi- with me kids too they're always
17             m- you know moving things and (.) aw I can't
18             find anything and .h then I've got sciatica on
19             top of it now which is- means I can hardly
20             move
21   Cal:      .hhh it's just one thing after the other and
22             me kid's been hit by a car and oh:: hh
23   Con:      okay so did you actually receive a letter at
24             all from AGL that was addressed directly to you
25             in regards to when you called our office
26   Cal:      Hh a::h
27             (1.2)
```

The matter itself concerns a series of electricity bills the caller has received which have not subtracted the discount he negotiated with the company through a previous case lodged with EWOV. In this segment of the complaint narrative, the caller describes how the company has sent him a bill that, he suspects, he has already paid, and how this process of paying is difficult and possibly unfair, requiring for example

that one needs to keep receipts in order to not be duped into paying the same bill twice. The self-disclosure that bookends this point (lines 4-5) orients specifically to this issue of remembering. The caller discloses that he is *"on a large amount of painkillers"*, and this is preceded by the causal conjunction 'because'. The painkillers are positioned in a way that accounts for, or excuses, the issue of remembering bills, paid or unpaid. It also serves add spice to the moral flavour of the narrative: paying bills accurately requires special effort, and this effort is particularly strenuous when under the influence of painkilling drugs. At line 6 the caller issues the discourse marker 'right' with questioning intonation, demonstrating a search for some kind of uptake of the point from the Intake Officer. No uptake is provided, and the caller launches into further self-disclosure at line 7. This time he provides more extensive and detailed information about the painkillers. He describes how he is *"suffering from chronic pain"*, and is *"on a large amount of morphine and stuff like that"*. This works on the previous disclosure about the painkillers by accounting for why he takes them *("for the pain"),* building up the facticity of the claim and also indexing the illness itself as medical: 'chronic pain' differs from pain in that it requires formal diagnosis and treatment on the part of medical professionals. In the subsequent turn at line 10 the caller provides the evaluative point to this further self-disclosure, describing the events (the payment of bills) as being *"very very hard"*. He follows this with the discourse marker *'you know'* and then discloses his trouble with remembering: *"I lose track of things"*. After the Intake Officer's continuer (*"mmm"*) he emphasizes this in another turn that operates as an increment (Schegloff, 1996) which links to the previous self-disclosure: he loses track of things *"very easily"*. All of this demonstrates quite extensive work on what is, on the surface, a straightforward claim in the complaint narrative: it is difficult to accurately pay bills. The caller's self-disclosures all work to account for that difficulty in a personal way. It is *especially* difficult due to the particularities of his illness and the medication required to manage that illness. Ultimately the accomplishment of these self-disclosing utterances is evaluative, as the event itself, the paying of bills, is indexed negatively.

The overlapping turns at lines 14 and 15 indicate the point at which the caller orients to progressing with further narration, while the Intake Officer attempts to close this particular part of the telling and to move into a new line of activity: the use of 'alright' may signal that a preceding turn is recognised as complete and that an activity transition is relevant (Beach, 1993). It is the caller who retains the floor at line 16, and

this turn again works, quite remarkably, to perform yet more self-disclosure and to develop the narrative in progress. The caller recounts how his children are *"always moving things"* which makes finding anything problematic. In light of his already established memory problems this heightens the difficulties that he faces in competently transacting business with his power company. The self-disclosures that follow this, however, are difficult to reconcile with the immediate narrative project. The caller discloses a further illness – sciatica[1] – and its severe affect: he *"can hardly move"*. This is a more global self-disclosure in the sense that while it may relate to the events in the narrative, it also relates to most activity in general: the caller appears to move from a specific type of disadvantage to a more general one, from being unable to accurately deal with energy payments to being unable to move. He has transitioned himself into a particular identity framework, one that invokes a palpable sense of hardship and struggle, and this is accomplished through incremental self-disclosing statements. This happens even more candidly in the next turn (line 21) where the claim *"it's just one thing after another"* compounds the sense of difficulty and struggle he currently faces. He then again discloses that his child has been hit by a car (recall, this was one of the disclosures made in the opening of the narrative itself), and finally closes the turn with an audible and extended groan, something that serves as the visceral embodiment of the difficulties and the suffering that he has disclosed (see Heath, 1989, for a discussion of such utterances as 'Pain Talk'). This is a dramatic conclusion to this passage of activity, which has developed from indexing a particular and institutionally relevant event as negative and difficult into a much broader description of suffering and distress in general. The critical point for this analysis is that this is all accomplished through self-disclosure. If the final self-disclosures are deployed in the service of claiming a particular disadvantaged identity, then this is not taken up in the Intake Officer's response beginning line 23. The turn-initial *"okay"* acknowledges the previous talk by the caller but does not demonstrate affiliation or sympathy, and the Intake Officer proceeds to re-orient the caller to the institutionally relevant aspects of the matter by deploying a question that relates to his prior arrangement with the energy company. So even though the caller has performed quite in-depth self-disclosures and worked to establish a disadvantaged identity, this does not come to be taken up in the ensuing interaction itself. One of the interesting aspects of the self-disclosures in this call is their

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[1] A form of lower back and leg pain caused by compression of the sciatic nerves in the lower spine.

recurrence. The caller began the narrative by listing several of the problems that he later re-introduces to the talk. Another example of this is investigated in the analysis below.

Extract 7. [219011: Kids' Shower, p. 1]

```
1    Con:    .hh good afternoon energy and water ombudsman this
2            is Yarn speaking
3    Cal:    hi this is um Sarah Bishopton .hh um I rang up (0.2)
4            um (.) I think it was a week and a half ago .hh
5            about um (0.2) my electricity being cut off (.) and
6            I got some help with that .h but yesterday um
7            they've done the same thing (0.2) origin energy
8            have done the same thing that they did with the
9            electricity (.) with my gas? .hh yesterday? .hh and
10           I've rang them back up yesterday and they told me
11           um (0.4) I'm only on a single parenting payment
12           pension .h and they've told me I need to pay um
13           (0.2) six hundred dollars (.) before they can
14           reconnect it? .hh no[w I-]
15   Con:                   [okay] sorry you-
16   Cal:    I can't give my (.) do- my kids a shower or
17   Con:    .hh so they've done this (0.2) hha- u:m a[m I]=
18   Cal:                                           [ha-]
19   Con:    =speaking with Sarah Bishopton of Delaware?
20   Cal:    yes t[hat]'s right
21   Con:         [.hh]        okay so you've got an open case
22           f- (0.5) [for] the electricity that was=
23   Cal:            [yes]
24   Con:    =disconnected [ .hh  s o  w a s -  ]
25   Cal:                  [yes and they've don-] they've done
26           that same thing with my: gas they didn't send me
27           no (.) um disconnection warnings I haven't received
28           .hh no mail from my gas- from them for about four
29           weeks now so
30   Con:    [okaaaa-]
31   Cal:    [and the]y've just done it automatically
32   Con:    .h[h hhh]
33   Cal:      [in th]e middle of the day and can j- have
34           n[o war]nings or anything?
35   Con:     [a- hh]                       and when was that?
36   Cal:    yesterday? af[ternoon]
37   Con:                 [yesterd]ay oka:y
38           (1.0)
39   Con:    .hh
40           (0.8)
41   Con:    ka:y
42   Cal:    not very good with two young children
43   Con:    no
44   Cal:    hmm
45           (0.8)
```

The first self-disclosure in this call occurs at line 11. The caller is in the middle of a telling that provides the details of the matter—a gas disconnection that has recently been carried out. The dénouement of the telling is the bill the company has given her and its size. The caller manages to render this size as problematic and unreasonable – complainable – by disclosing her income. She is *"only on a single parenting payment pension",* the lexical term 'only' working to present this is a meagre or minimum

amount, a form of extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). The care taken in the deployment of this self-disclosure and its rhetorical function are evidenced by its position in the narrative, as the caller offers it as an insertion repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). She halts the progression of the description of what the company has told her in order to deploy the self-disclosing utterance, and then takes the telling up again. The accomplishment of this is to render the bill itself as especially problematic: meagre incomes do not generally manage to make short work of large bills.

At line 16 the caller again utilises self-disclosure in the narrative, this time to provide an evaluative upshot of the matter. This turn recognizably links to the preceding narrative with the repetition of the pronoun 'I'. The ramification of the gas disconnection is that she is unable to give her children 'a shower', although the cut-off 'do-' might be on its way to specifying them as 'daughters'. In terms of its position at the tail-end of the narrative this is a tidy example of self-disclosure in the service of rendering an event as a troubling or a transgressive one. It also, however, makes available for the caller a certain interactional resource. Introducing her children and their deprivation into the telling comes to develop into a kind of material for evaluative critique. This occurs at line 42. Before this, Intake Officer and caller have engaged in talk about the matter after identifying the caller in the RESOLVE system.[1] At 42, the caller offers an evaluative assessment of the situation that relies on the previously introduced children. The matter is *"not very good with two young children"*. The children, and the attendant concerns about their care and standard of living serve to qualify the assessment and to strengthen the moral work that it does (interestingly in this case the Intake Officer does offer an aligning response to the assessment). The point that this example illustrates is that once information has been disclosed it may resurface in callers' talk, and do so in ways that relate to the complaining project. Self-disclosing may invoke particular categories that enable later activities. In this case the children may be reintroduced to the talk and used to qualify and strengthen a negative assessment. In the previous call, Sciatica, the illness and suffering of the caller was introduced at the beginning of the complaint narrative and then redeployed in order to

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[1] In this case the task of the Intake Officer is complicated by the fact that the caller already has a case lodged in the system that relates to the present matter. In these instances Intake Officers must handle two cases simultaneously: the existing case must be reviewed and reconciled with the current matter, a point relating to an interview exert in chapter three (p. 39) where Sian recounts the concern that companies are not contacted about the same matter twice.

cast bill-paying as an especially negative event. In the next extract, children are again introduced into the complaint narrative via self-disclosure.

Extract 8. [242003: Crying Baby, p. 1]

```
18   Con:    .H [okay]. who's your retailer
19   Cal:       [a:nd]
20   Cal:    origin hh
21   Con:    okay l[et me-]
22   Cal:         [and I ]had aksed there right to speak
23           to the manager? (.) No. No. No. No like this
24           and she goes 'oh- what's it regarding?' and
25           I'm like 'my account' (.) I've got a learning
26           disability too I don't need to: .h (0.3) u::m
27           be stressed out to the max either because
28           right I've also got two kids that I've gotta
29           look after as well?
30           (.)
31   Cal:    a:nd ((baby screams in background)) yeah °hmm°
32   Con     .hh okay so[:]              [hh]
33   Cal:               [I]'m not quite [ha]ppy with them
34           actually
35           (0.6)
36   Cal:    hhh I mean you know I'm trying to do the best
37           as I can?
38           (.)
39   Cal:    right? trying to bring up my two kids making
40           sure that they've got everything like nappies
41           wipes whatever else
42           (1.0)
43   Cal:    a[::nd  with m]y: (.) [cen]tre link payment=
44   Con:     [okay. so you:]      [HHh] ((audible sigh))
45   Cal:    =right? [wit]h my disa- with my disability=
46   Con:            [.hh]
47   Cal:    =pension?
48           (.)
49   Cal:    .hh u::m I've only had one payment since
50           what/right I've been in here
51   Con:    alright so you set up a payment plan with them?
```

This complaint concerns the caller being threatened with an electricity disconnection due to the non-payment of several instalments owing according to her payment plan with the company. The caller secures the floor at line 22, diverting the talk from the activity of gathering the mandatory field information. The caller proceeds to take up her narrative of the matter by describing her conversation in a call to her energy provider. At line 25, following a brief interruption in the progression of the narrative, the caller issues the first of two self-disclosing utterances. She has a learning disability, and the upshot of this is that she doesn't need to be *"stressed out to the max"* (an explicit example of an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986)). This construction, disclosure - upshot, works to claim a kind of exemption for the caller in the way that she is dealt with by the company in question. In particular, the learning

disability (and note again the medical reference) renders the stressful interaction as being especially troubling, in her particular case. It is not something that she 'needs' in light of her disability, it is not something she should have to go through. Instead of reverting back to further narration about this interaction, the caller goes on to disclose further information, that she has two children that she has to look after. The relationship between this disclosure and the previous claim about being stressed out is somewhat unclear, as the previous disclosure – upshot linkage appear to become extended: the "not needing to be stressed out" *also* relates to the looking after of the children, however this isn't ordered in a logical, causal sense as the second disclosure retroactively links to the earlier upshot. The effect nonetheless is to further establish the case for the caller having a particular claim to being exempt from the treatment she is apparently receiving from her energy provider. There are now two reasons she should not be 'stressed out to the max': her learning disability and her role as a mother. Now the turn itself closes with questioning intonation that is followed by a pause, possibly demonstrating a search for some kind of uptake on the part of the Intake Officer. The caller begins to provide a further turn at line 31 however abandons this, and at this point the Intake Officer begins to speak, however her talk is superseded by the caller as she produces an evaluative assessment of the company: *"I'm not quite happy with them actually"*. The caller's two turns that follow this assessment, between lines 36 and 41, further develop the identity established through the previous disclosures. She is 'trying to do the best that she can' in raising her children and providing them with a quality standard of living. The notable feature of these passages of talk are the pauses that follow them and the questioning intonation of both the turn at 36 and the 'right' that precedes the talk about how she provides for her children. Each provides evidence for an orientation towards some uptake on the part of the Intake Officer. The particularly strong moral implications of the talk, her struggling to raise her children, possibly render some form of affiliation as a relevant response. The silences at lines 38 and 42 represent her orientation to this as a possibility. This represents a development of what it is that the disclosed information does, or attempts to do, in the interaction. Here the caller clearly searches for some kind of uptake of her self-disclosures from her hearer, while in the earlier instance, the self-disclosures were directed towards the narrated-matter itself and how the caller should be exempted from the stressful dealings with the energy company. The claims that self-disclosures make may be similar ('I have a

learning disability', 'I have children') however their function in actual interaction may differ significantly.

Conclusions

This chapter examined a feature that occurred in several of the complaint narratives collected in the corpus. This feature was the use of self-disclosing utterances, spates of talk where callers introduced information about themselves into the conversation. The initial consideration here is how this relates to the activity of complaining. It appears to do this in a range of ways. The most significant of these is the way that self-disclosure may work to cast the events depicted in a narrative as problematic and warranting complaining. As Drew (1998) and Edwards (2005) rightly point out, the central task of a complaint narrative is to index matters as transgressions or troubles, and this can be accomplished through a range of practices. Here, it appeared in most cases that self-disclosure was put to work to do this, although in varying ways. Commonly, the information that the self-disclosures provided appeared to categorise the callers themselves as somehow disadvantaged, or struggling with various hardships. When this categorisation was contrasted with specific events, it served to render those events as problematic and possibly morally wrong. In several of the extracts the self-disclosures related to illness. These extracts demonstrated the point above as callers, by introducing their illnesses and the symptoms of these illnesses, were able to point out how aspects of the events they narrated were harmful, taxing, and unfair. The self-disclosures enabled the establishment or claim to identities that allowed for these evaluations. Considering the dearth of discursive research into commercial complaint handling and in particular *indirect* commercial complaint handling this is an important finding as it may represent a particular orientation callers have to the process of complaining itself, and in addition may represent a particular practice in such interactions.

The next key conclusion concerns the way that the self-disclosures, once made, appeared to remain relevant in the complaint narratives, as callers sought to recycle the disclosed information in the service of making evaluations of the events they narrated. As both the Multiple Sclerosis and Kids' Shower calls demonstrated, early self-disclosures were later referenced in evaluations. In the case of the Multiple Sclerosis call, the caller reintroduced his managerial expertise in order to add validity to his negative evaluation of the company he had been dealing with. In the Kids' Shower call,

the caller qualified her negative assessment of the matter she had brought up by pairing it with her children and their standard of living. In this sense the kinds of information, or identities, that self-disclosures make available can come to be re-used as complaint narratives (and complaint calls themselves) progress, rendering it a particularly potent resource.

The next point concerns the actual nature of the complaints in each of the cases presented. One of the interesting linkages between these calls is the absence of any *specific error* on the part of the company. Excluding the enquiry calls, the remainder of calls in the corpus featured very clear and specific accounts from callers about what had actually gone wrong. For example, receiving bills that were meant for the house next door, not having a solar-energy rebate attached to electricity bills, or receiving too many consecutive meter reads. In each case, those callers' narratives centred around a clear, observable instance (or instances) of error where fault is quite concisely and explicitly attributed due to the clear rules of the contracts between consumer and company. Those accounts orient very strongly to facticity, and there is a preponderance of dates, contractual information, and historical reportage that demonstrates this. In the extracts presented here, however, the nature of the wrongdoing is far less clear. For example, several of these calls feature 'receiving a high bill' as the actual complainable event. These aren't challenged on their accuracy, however. Instead the callers work to cast them as *morally* wrong, not *factually* wrong. Similarly, recall in the Multiple Sclerosis call how the caller himself questions early on whether his complaint is indeed 'legitimate'. And the actual outcomes of the complaints themselves attest to this, as they all involve securing payment plans and concessions with the companies in question, not challenging the actual problematic events themselves.[1] This potentially has implications for understanding how consumers orient to EWOV and commercial regulation authorities in general, and I return to this point in the discussion section.

Finally, how does this research speak to current understandings of self-disclosure and its relation ship to self-presentation? Firstly, self-disclosure is a flexible and yet powerful conversational tool in the construction of complaints, precisely because of the kinds of 'self' that it enables. As we have seen callers may present themselves, through self-disclosure, as ill, poor, down on their luck, and generally disadvantaged, and for reasons that relate closely to the specific activities they are

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[1] Although in the Multiple Sclerosis call the caller outcome includes receiving an apology for his treatment at the hands of the company's customer service department in addition to securing a payment plan.

engaged in at the moment of the disclosures. This relates very closely to the theories of self-presentation (and impression management) outlined earlier in the chapter as these 'selves' are *used* to accomplish interpersonal business like persuading and attempting to secure affiliation and sympathy. The kind of self-presentation that this analysis suggests, however, is one that is much more specific and dynamic than those models, particular in relation to goals. Recall for example Schlenker's (2003) description of goals as 'securing instrumental outcomes'. This is well and good, but which outcomes? Here the callers engaging in self-presentation (through self-disclosure) appear to have much more specific goals, goals occasioned by the very stages of the interaction that they are participating in: claiming expertise in order to evaluate an event negatively, for example, or listing a series of hardships in order to prepare the ground for the delivery of a complaint narrative. These are fleeting things, captured only through the close investigation of the interactions themselves and the discursive production of 'self-presentation' in conversation. But to generalise goals as 'instrumental outcomes', for example, is to miss a huge aspect of the phenomenon itself. To conclude here that 'Caller X presented herself as economically disadvantaged in order to receive the help of EWOV' is to gloss over a huge amount of information about how that actually took place. It is a conclusion derived from the rough strokes of a chainsaw, when really a scalpel is the appropriate tool. To the end of aligning this analysis with self-presentation's conceptualisation in social psychology, I stop short on the point. It seems from this analysis that the more accurate approach to self-presentation as it pertains to interaction is that of the discursive researchers, in particular those that take seriously the claim proposed by Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) that identities (selves) are continually and dynamically reproduced to match the demands of an interaction itself. Appreciating that may lead to better, more accurate accounts that pack more descriptive punch in the situations that self-presentation may occur in. As this chapter has shown, approaching it in this way reveals a rich and detailed understanding of the practice.

Discussion

Fundamentally, the work presented here sought to challenge several existing research approaches to complaining and complaint handling that had developed in social and consumer psychology. The central critique of these approaches was that they had deviated from one of the primary aspects of these phenomena: that they are observable and orderly behaviours that occur not in imagined scenarios or cognitive models but rather in real life, and in real interactions. Working under this premise, that the phenomena represent both an accountable and systematic behaviour, as well as one that occurs primarily interpersonally and through language, this thesis has explored aspects of complaint handling and complaining within a particular institution using several methodological approaches. Through an ethnographic investigation of the institution under study (EWOV) I have examined the accountable activities and systematic procedures employed in order to handle complaints and enquiries, and have also explicated how particular institutional technologies and imperatives may impact on the way that this is done. Secondly, by using the research method of CA I have investigated the initial turns of callers to the institution as they present their 'reasons for the call' and the way that this is taken up by the Intake Officers who receive these calls. Through this I have offered an account for the way that individual callers' versions of complaining or enquiring come to be reconciled with the systematic approach of the EWOV Intake Officers. Finally, an investigation into the complaint narratives of callers, employing both CA and DP research perspectives, has revealed a particular practice apparently employed by some callers in order to cast the events they complain about negatively or to secure affiliation and possibly sympathy—the practice of self-disclosure. This final chapter reviews the key results of these chapters in light of the overall research questions established at the beginning of the research, and reviews the limitations and implications of the work.

Complaints as Work

Part of the literature review presented some existing approaches to complaint handling as a form of customer oriented service work. In particular it focused on prescriptive guides for complaint handling, such as the work of Davidow (2000) who offered recommendations for complaint such as displays of sincerity and effortful approaches to customer interactions through perspective taking, or the work of Stephens (2000), who recommended that complaint handling be developed in order to restore

customer relationships and to provision commercial firms with market information to strengthen their position. It also concentrated on studies investigating workplaces through the practical activities necessary for the accomplishment of institutional and interpersonal goals in these service encounters (e.g Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987, Heath et al., 2004). Drawing on the approaches of those latter studies, in chapter three I presented the ethnographic investigation of EWOV with an eye to reconceptualising the way that complaining and complaint handling as a workplace activity was understood. Instead of approaching it from an idealised or 'optimising' angle emphasizing what *should* happen, I sought instead to investigate complaint handling at EWOV with regard to what actually *did* happen. To do this I employed documentary analysis, participant observation sessions, and research interviews of Intake Officers—those EWOV employees whose role it was to process complaints and enquiries. This analysis allowed a description of complaining and complaint handling that was more detailed and complex than the kinds of depictions offered by other studies. One of the core results of this ethnographic analysis was that the ICT system employed at EWOV, the RESOLVE system, had an extensive impact on the way that complaint handling, and indeed complaint and enquiry interactions themselves, took place. This was revealed from both the participant observation sessions as well as the Intake Officer interviews where features of the system, in particular its workflow layout and its structured questions were repeatedly used and referred to in order to structure interactions with callers and the way that the work pertaining to complaint handling was accomplished. A second core result from this research was that the Intake Officers' accounts revealed variable, idiosyncratic approaches to the way that they performed their work. Importantly this revealed that instead of a standardized approach to complaint handling these employees developed, through their own experiences, their own preferred methods for accomplishing their work tasks. Lastly, this research revealed particular, local demands for complaint handling at EWOV that also affected the way that the work was done. In particular, EWOV's constitutionally embedded policy of neutrality, as well as the technologies of quality assurance, served to influence the particular way that complaint handling was done at the institution.

These findings offer some important challenges to both current conceptualisations of complaining as well as complaint handling. Firstly, the kinds of treatment afforded to complaining by both social and consumer psychology research are perhaps not specific enough to capture this amount of detail. Consider for example the

definition of complaining within this literature: as an expression of dissatisfaction in the service of some goal(s) (Kowalski, 1996). Such a definition appears somewhat simplistic in light of the detailed systematic treatment of complaints presented in the ethnographic investigation, as complaining is instead treated as a set of coordinated work activities tightly bound to an array of institutional prerogatives and systems. It seems that research that is able to capture such *local* conceptualisations of complaining are better positioned to account for it as a behaviour. This relates also to the way that this research chapter informs existing approaches to complaint handling. Again, the level of detail offered here is not captured by the majority of existing research on the subject. In light of calls in research such as that of Larivet and Brouard (2010), and Gelbricht and Roschk (2011) for complaint handling policies to continually develop in line with rapidly changing markets and customer perceptions, as well as claims that such developments should also prevent stress and strain on customer service workers themselves (Wray-Bliss, 2001), it is perhaps worthwhile for researchers and indeed complaint handling practitioners themselves to treat the practice as, like complaining, a *local* one, with its own demands peculiar to the particular situations of complaint handling institutions and firms. Such approaches are also better positioned to be able to grasp and develop local ICT technologies, as well as to take into greater consideration the existing expertise and knowledge of those engaged in the field of complaint handling. I return to a consideration of this in the later implications section of this discussion.

Opening Activities in Complaint and Enquiry Calls

Chapter four offered a detailed examination of callers' opening turns in conversations with Intake Officers as they provided their 'reason for the call', and the way that such turns were taken up by Intake Officers. To do this, it employed the CA research methodology, and was informed also by existing research on this opening activity in calls to other institutional phone services (Potter & Hepburn, 2003; Emmison & Danby, 2007). Following the ethnographic investigation chapter, which identified the particular activities that Intake Officers themselves treated as necessary for accomplishing an institutional interaction with callers, this chapter sought to investigate how such institutional approaches fitted with callers' own approaches to the activities they sought to undertake in their calls. The first key finding from the analysis presented in this chapter was the variation in the opening formulations of the reason for the call

depending on whether that call was an enquiry or a complaint. Callers with an enquiry would routinely use that lexical term specifically, or a variant of it, in offering the reason for the call. When callers did this, Intake Officers appeared to orient to the delivery of some narrative on the part of the caller as being in the service of doing the enquiring. In contrast, complaining callers, in giving their reasons for the call, avoided that term in favour of either announcing a problem or trouble, or requesting assistance. This offered intriguing support for Edward's (2005) claim, emphasised in the literature review, that complaining is possibly oriented to as being a negatively valued activity that speakers avoid identifying themselves or their talk with. The second finding from this analysis concerned the way that initial complaint formulations were taken up by Intake Officers. When callers formulated their reason for the call as a request for help without previously identifying some issue or trouble, then Intake Officers would issue continuer responses that saw callers begin a 'telling' of the matter that, when it became recognisable to the Intake Officer as being institutionally relevant business, would be interrupted in the service of beginning the tasks of registering a complaint. In contrast, troubles announcements or trouble – request announcements were responded to immediately by the initiation of such tasks of registration. Lastly, returning callers would, following a greeting, identify themselves as returning callers before offering a reason for their call. Such callers were permitted to continue with their narratives of the matter provided that the Intake Officer was able to identify them on the RESOLVE system.

This analysis imparts some conclusions regarding current understandings of complaint handling as a form of institutional interaction. Firstly, the opening activity of offering a reason for the call and an institutional agent's response to that turn appears to be an important point in these interactions for establishing initial alignment for the overall project of registering a complaint, or a case. Responses that serve as continuers are treated by callers as a signal that beginning a narration of the details of the matter is the relevant next activity, whereas responses that initiate institutional business, which in this case was commonly asking for caller details, instead orient callers to these particular activities that are necessary for the actual institutional process of complaining. Whether these activities are launched or not at this point appears to hinge on whether the reason for the call formulation is identified by Intake Officers as being about institutionally relevant business. This pattern appears to be quite similar to existing understandings of the structure of complaining in mundane interactions, for

example Jefferson (1988) and Drew (1998) both describe complaint openings as featuring some announcement, followed by a turn which takes up that announcement, followed by the beginning of a complaint narrative. In this case, however, the announcement takes the form of the provision of the reason for the call, which may be designed in a variety of ways. For Intake Officers, the way they take up these reasons for the call establishes what will follow, either a narrative account or the beginning of institutional tasks. The reason for the call should be considered an important activity considering this, as there are ramifications for how quickly registration may proceed from the opening of calls.

The analysis of the reason for the call also demonstrated a deviation from research into the structure of complaining mentioned above. It appeared that, in some cases, reasons for the call were provided that did not demonstrate a negative stance towards the matter, yet these were still taken up by Intake Officers as projecting an upcoming complaint, as they responded by initiating institutional tasks. This illustrates the way that the institutional role itself comes to bear on the way that complaining is treated as an activity. Matters relevant to the function of EWOV, matters pertaining to energy and water that is, are recognised and responded to by initiating the registration of a complaint, and this can occur even in the absence of any indication that the matter itself is problematic, or indexed negatively by the caller. Researchers considering complaint handling, and particularly those interested in developing or improving complaint handling procedures and systems, may benefit from an analysis similar to this, particularly due to the insight it enables into the interplay between the orientations of individual callers or customers, and the procedural approaches to interaction adopted institutional agents performing their work roles. Such analysis allows an understanding of how alignment may take place in these interactions, and focusing on aligning callers to the institutional methods for 'doing complaining' may be a powerful method for developing and improving the task of complaint handling.

Self-Disclosure and Complaining

The final analytic chapter presented an investigation into the way some callers would employ self-disclosure as they went about complaining, and into the way that this practice was taken up by Intake Officers. This was interpreted in light of existing understandings of self-disclosure and self-presentation within social psychology. A key finding from this chapter was that disclosing personal information served to index the

called-about matters in a negative light—a central task for those constructing complaints. In particular, the self-disclosures appeared to be put to work in categorising the speakers as 'disadvantaged', a particular type of category that when juxtaposed with the narrated events appeared to render those events as inherently unjust. Secondly, the identities that were established through those disclosures obtained some durability in the talk, and were frequently referred to by callers as their interactions with Intake Officers progressed. In this sense they served as a kind of rhetorical asset in the talk as callers went about, for example, securing sympathy, or attempting to secure endorsement or support for the particular claims they were making. Thirdly, the inspection of the actual matters being reported in these complaints revealed that they were not reported as instances of actual error, but rather were described as problematic for callers on a moral level. Bills, for example, were not disputed for their accuracy, but rather criticised for their amounts themselves. Finally, these disclosures and the disadvantaged identities they enabled were carefully managed by Intake Officers as they sought to re-orient callers to specific details or tasks, as opposed to affiliating with their claims or aligning with the activities they undertook, indicating that this practice may be contrary to Intake Officers' approaches to complaint handling.

This extends current understandings of the way that complaining is accomplished through talk. As the literature review noted, a range of linguistic devices have been identified that speakers use in the service of doing complaining, for example idiomatic expressions (Drew & Holt, 1988), reported thought (Haakana, 2007), and extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986). Using self-disclosure to identify oneself as being disadvantaged may be another device deployed by complaining speakers. What distinguishes it from other findings however is that the finding is drawn from institutional, as opposed to mundane, interaction. It may be that this practice is isolated to such forms of interaction, particularly considering the role of EWOV as a potential force in alleviating the distress some customers find themselves experiencing. As a hypothetical example, someone complaining to a friend about their energy bill might avoid such potentially embarrassing revelations as, say, their income, whereas in complaining to an anonymous institutional agent a caller may treat such a disclosure as a resource for, ultimately, securing institutional help. This relates interestingly to the research of social and consumer psychology that positions goals as a cause of complaining (e.g Alicke et al., 1991; Hunt, 1991; Kowalski, 1996). It may be of use to researchers of commercial complaint handling to consider the particular ways that

callers use their talk to actually go about securing such goals. In particular this is of interest in light of the increasing development of consumer regulation agencies similar to EWOV (Ryan, 2001), as it may be that this practice is isolated to such institutions which do not receive *direct* complaints (complaints about their own institution) but rather indirect complaints that focus on the institutions that they oversee.

Limitations and Future Directions

A central limitation of the findings discussed here concerns the nature of the data they are derived from. EWOV as an institution deals with indirect complaining, not with direct complaining. In that sense it may be that the results inform only those institutions that specialise in this type of complaint handling, and do not generalize to the handling of direct complaints. This limitation applies also to the way that the findings presented here apply to complaining as a behaviour. The findings may inform understandings of indirect complaining as it occurs in interaction, as opposed to direct complaining. Nonetheless, the research here represents a promising approach to addressing such limitations if future research is undertaken. It would be of great assistance to further developing current understandings of complaining and complaint handling if a corpus of complaint calls taken from an institution dealing with direct complaints could be analysed. Such research may be able to identify further discursive practices employed by complaining callers in these interactions, which would assist in extending existing knowledge of how direct complaints are accomplished in interaction. It would be of particular interest to consider how practices differed from those presented here, considering that callers complaining directly to an institution may attempt less to secure affiliation, sympathy, or support, and more to cast events negatively. Another reason that the research approach employed here would be of use is the level of detail it is able to establish and the way that it is able to be applied to varying scenarios. Not all complaining is the same, and not all complaint handling is the same, however they share the use of language as the medium through which they are accomplished, and they share the notion that they commonly in interpersonal interaction. Those working towards understanding complaining should treat this variability and these discursive and interpersonal features seriously, particularly where their work concerns developing complaint handling within institutions.

Conclusion

The research presented here has, ultimately, offered two things: a reformulation of complaining and complaint handling, and a potentially useful methodological approach for developing local accounts for the way that they work in institutional scenarios. Resisting existing unitary approaches to complaining and complaint handling, it has instead treated them as local, indexical concerns, requiring 'comprehension in their own regimes' (Townley, 2008). The overarching concern here has been an orientation to utility. One needn't read too deeply into any newspaper or current affairs website to appreciate that dissatisfaction and complaining are powerful forces, socially, politically, and commercially. However the referent terms themselves – 'complaining' and 'complaint handling' – cover behaviours that vary widely and that will continue to vary widely as the situations they occur in continue to change and to develop. It is hoped that the ideas and approaches outlined in this thesis may be developed further in order to continue to enhance existing understandings of complaining and complaint handling and to help those who are involved in this field.

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Appendix A: Transcription Symbols

The goal of transcription using CA conventions is to attempt to capture as great a level of detail as possible while at the same time bearing in mind that the finished product itself must be aesthetically logical and easy to read. The transcription approach employed here was developed by Gail Jefferson. A succinct discussion of this development may be found in Jefferson, 2004.

.	A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone.
,	A comma indicates continuing intonation.
?	A question mark indicates rising intonation.
an-	A dash marks a sudden cut off in the production of a word or sound.
(.)	A full stop in brackets indicates a pause of around one tenth of a second, or 'beat of silence'.
(1.5)	A number in brackets indicates a silence of that length. The silence depicted here for example is 1.5 seconds.
hh	'h' indicates an out breath. The number of h's used signals the length of the out breath.
.hh	'h' preceded by a full stop indicates an in breath. The more h's used then the longer the in breath.
=	The equals sign indicates latching between utterances, i.e there is no discernible gap or pause between them.
Hel[lo] [Hi]	Square brackets mark the onset and the termination of overlap, two speakers producing talk at the same time.
CAPS	Capital letters indicate that speech is significantly louder than surrounding talk, although capital letters used in proper nouns do not indicate this.
underline	The use of underlining under talk marks that the speaker is emphasizing that talk.
°quiet°	The wrapping of talking degree signs indicates that that talk is noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
( )	Empty parentheses indicate that a piece of talk is unclear and unable to be captures through transcription.
((*crying*))	Words contained within double parentheses indicate the meta-commentary of the transcriber, where they indicate verbal activity that may not be captured through the use of symbols.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Interactional Procedures in the Presentation of Complaints to the Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria.

Introduction Stage

The participant is to be welcomed into the Lilydale room and introduced to the researcher. They are to be provided with the information sheet and given time to read it. Following this, the participant in invited to ask the researcher any questions they may have regarding the interview and the research project as a whole. Should the participant accept the terms of the interview they will indicate this by signing the consent form for the interview.

Interview

The following questions are those that will guide participants' interviews.

1. It's clear that there are several tasks you need to accomplish during each call you receive. Can you outline any preferred order you have for accomplishing these tasks?

2. Does your training, or any specific policy, recommend this order of tasks during a call?

3. Of the tasks, which do you find the most difficult to achieve, or problematic, and why?

4. Can you please outline how you type up the reports of complaints that you receive? Which pieces of information do you include?

5. Do you find that callers offer redundant information that is not relevant to what you need to record? How do you deal with this information?

6. How important is it that you project 'being neutral' during calls? Do you ever find this difficult during your conversations with callers?

7. Do you always offer the same resolution options to callers towards the ends of calls?

8. Do you find that callers usually have enough of the required information for you to construct a report on their case when they call?

Closing Stages

Following the interview proper, participants will be provided with a debriefing form outlining the questions that were asked and how they fit in to the research project as a whole. Participants will be invited to ask any questions they might have regarding the interview or of the research as a whole. Once this has been done to their satisfaction they will be thanked and will exit.

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet: Interactional Procedures in the Presentation of Complaints to the Electricity and Water Ombudsman of Victoria.

Researcher: Joe Dewar, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington.

This study is being completed as part of a broader research project being undertaken in order to complete a Masters Thesis. I'm investigating in detail how conversations are carried out between callers and conciliators from your office, the Electricity and Water Ombudsman of Victoria (EWOV). The university requires that ethics approval be obtained for research involving human participants.

To further my understanding of these conversations, I'd like to conduct interviews with a small number of EWOV conciliators. I'd like to ask some questions about how conciliators deal with particular aspects of calls, as well as some questions about training and company policies and how these might impact on your conversations with callers. Interviews should not take longer than 30 minutes. Audio from the interviews will be recorded and then transcribed.

Exerts from the transcribed interview may be included in an analytic chapter of my research thesis. The audio recordings of the interviews will only be available to those directly involved in the research, my supervisor (Dr. Ann Weatherall) and myself. Your name will not be included in the transcription of your interview, nor will it be included in any subsequent usage of the interview transcript, thus you will not be identified in the thesis or in any subsequent publications of research material.

Once the interviews have been transcribed, you have the option of being sent (in electronic format) a summary of the research that has been informed by your interview. You may at this point request that any information provided in your interview be withheld from analysis and deleted. Consent forms, audio recordings, and transcripts will be stored in a secure file and will be kept for at least two years after the project is finished. My Masters thesis will be submitted to the school of Psychology for marking and deposited into the University Library.

Should you have any questions regarding the research and your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact either me (email: dewarjame@myvuw.ac.nz) or my supervisor, Dr. Ann Weatherall (email: Ann.Weatherall@vuw.ac.nz) with your queries.

Appendix D: Participant Debriefing Form

Debriefing Statement

To the participant,

The interview you have just participated in is part of a larger research project directed towards the completion of a Masters thesis. As the information sheet for the interview outlined, the focus of this research is to investigate the interactional structures and speaker practices used in the conversations conciliators from your office have with callers. This debriefing sheet is going to go over the questions that were asked in the interview, to give you as a participant a clear understanding as to why you were asked these particular questions and how they help the research project as a whole.

The question about your preferred order of tasks in a call was asked to help me as the researcher get a better conceptual grasp on how calls proceed. When researching any form of institutional interaction, it's helpful to know how employees deal with the particular tasks they need to accomplish. Specifically, this question was to find out whether all the conciliators I interviewed approached the order of tasks the same way, or whether there were individual differences. I also wanted to know whether your training had recommended your preferred order of tasks, and which tasks you found the most difficult to accomplish during conversations. These questions were included to help me further my understanding about the structure of the conversations conciliators have with callers, specify which particular tasks were more delicate then others.

You were asked how you type up the reports of the calls and complaints you received, and the information that you included in these reports. In addition, I wanted to know how you deal with any redundant information that callers may offer during calls. These questions were asked so that, when the complaint calls are listened to, I can better understand how certain aspects of a callers complaint are possibly more important than others, and how you as a conciliator respond to this.

I asked about the issue of neutrality, and how you felt it impacted on your talk during conversations with callers. This was asked so that I can better understand how one of the major policies of your institution as a whole effects the actual interactions you, as representative members of this institution, have with callers. This is a major question for any study of institutional interaction, and your answers will help me to flesh out how this major policy plays out in the actual interactions you have with callers.

I also asked about the resolution options that you offer to callers towards the end of calls. Here, I wanted to find out whether the same options are always offered, or whether particular problems warrant different types of resolution.

Finally, I asked about the information callers have 'on hand' when they contact you, and whether you felt this was usually sufficient for you to construct a report about their cases. This was asked to help me understand how callers orient to their own particular tasks when they contact your institution, and whether they have some knowledge of their required 'role' in performing these tasks before they contact you.

These were the questions asked during the interview, and the reasons why they will be helpful to the research project.

The final note for this debriefing sheet concerns the option you have of receiving and reviewing the summary of research informed by your interview. As the information sheet outlined, should you wish to receive this, you have a week from the date of receipt (some time prior to 31/03/2011) to contact the researcher with a request to exclude any information you do not wish to be analysed or published in any form. Again, pursuant to the comments in the information sheet, this information will subsequently be deleted from the data corpus and will not be published in any form.

If you have any further questions, then please do not hesitate to contact either me or my supervisor using our contact details provided on the information sheet.

Thank you very much for your participation,

Joe Dewar.