Transcript: NCRM Annual Lecture 2023

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Professor Gabriele Durrant: So, I would like to welcome everybody. I'm really delighted to see so many people here. So, I'm delighted to announce the NCRM annual lecture for this year. It's a very prestigious event. We've had it in the past before COVID, but obviously COVID happened and we were not able to do face to face events. And last year we've started to do some of these face to face activities again. And so, we have been able to run this annual lecture this year again and we are planning another one next year as well.

And I'm really pleased to see so many people here, both physically here in the room at the Royal Society. It's a fantastic venue that we've been able to get. And obviously to everyone that is online at home as well or in other locations.

And I'm delighted to welcome today's key speaker, Liz, Professor Elizabeth Stokoe, from the LSE here in London. And she has researched for many years conversation analysis and we will hear very shortly her talk about this very exciting research method area and I'm really delighted to hear new developers in this field. Obviously communication is extremely important.

And also, I would like to introduce Jon Sutton, the editor of The Psychologist, who will be today's discussed. So, I'm really pleased that this has worked out.

And okay, so, that was basically my welcome. I just want to take the opportunity to very briefly say a few words about NCRM. What are we doing? You know, quite a few of you will be familiar with NCRM activities, but maybe for some it's less prominent. So, basically we are providing high quality training in cutting edge research methods. Obviously we have some core intermediate research methods training as well, but the focus is on advanced cutting edge research methods and we really have a wide range of workstreams ranging from really the exploration horizon scanning activities, to informing a comprehensive training programme and eventually obviously creating impact. Obviously that leads us to having to evidence impact as well, and that's a very difficult task from training activities.

Basically, we are a consortium of three core universities. That is the University of Southampton, Manchester and also Edinburgh, and we have or we are joined by nine centre partners across the UK and their different expertise, different regional areas that are being covered here, both from the academic sector but also from non-academic sectors as well. And basically, NCRM is a distributed model. It's based on a partnership. So, a lot of these activities that we are doing are based on engagement, are based on collaboration, are based on activities together with external stakeholders.

And just to mention, the first phase of NCRM actually started in 2004, a very long time ago, and we've had various different phases of funding and lots of changes throughout. We're actually in the fourth phase of funding and throughout the remit and the organisation of NCRM has changed quite significantly. And in fact, next year we have the 20 year celebration or anniversary, so to speak. So, we will be organising a lot of activities next year as part of that. So, watch this space effectively. And if you have any ideas or want to contribute to that, obviously we are always very welcome to hear about that. I've just put the link to our website here. Just feel free to explore the activities that we have on there.

So, I just want to emphasise what is it that we are doing and why are we doing it? I just want to really emphasise the importance of research methods training. It really is about the application and use of high quality and appropriate research methods. That's really essential in basically all ways of research and life, and it's really important to improve evidence based policy decision-making. It's really underlying a lot of activities and I'm really passionate about that. I teach students about this, using appropriate methods and coming to the right sort of conclusion and being critical about the methods you're using and how to interpret that and so on, yeah? So, the aim is really to train researchers as to a high standard using appropriate, often innovative methods. It doesn't have to be always innovative, but NCRM is about innovation in some areas across the wide range of backgrounds. So, research methods areas not just quant and qual, but digital mixed methods, visual methods, a whole range of activities across all career stages. So, we're not just focusing on junior or PhD student, junior career researchers, but actually across the stages.

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So, we have, for example, innovation fora that are more designed for maybe more senior members of staff across sectors. It's not just academics. It's across a whole range of areas, businesses, industries and so on, across all disciplines and also not just within the social sciences, but actually going beyond as well. And obviously we have to bear in mind it's a fast changing environment and we have to adapt to some of these developments.

And the key thing is effectively to serve the research community and the common good, and that's the main driver that I really quite like to emphasise. And I'm proud to say there's also a very experienced, committed, passionate NCRM team behind all of this. Also, I would like to take the opportunity to really thank the team here today that has made it happen today and also we've had the advisory board meeting this afternoon. There are lots of things that have to happen and be organised. So, I'm really pleased to have that support there.

Just to emphasise, obviously it's a changing landscape. There are many changes. I mean there are lots of, you know, living in the time of uncertainty, not just because of the pandemic, lots of other activities or things that are happening as well. There are clearly technological changes that are happening at a very fast pace. There are societal changes, changing in the data landscape. We hear a lot about the digital footprints or big data and so on. And obviously all of these activities, new tools, research methods are constantly being developed or maybe they exist already, but maybe we are not always aware of them. So, being aware of them and being able to use them in appropriate manners is extremely important. Obviously also, the funding landscape is changing continuously.

So, all of these things really need or really emphasise that there is a need for social science scientists to be basically equipped for these changes and times of uncertainty to lead basically cross science, to lead the cross science agenda. It's really important for people to work collaboratively across disciplines, across sectors. One or two people cannot achieve or cannot address the sort of challenges we are facing and at different disciplines and people with very different skills have to work together. And that goes beyond the academic sector and obviously crosses across government business industry and so on.

So, it's really important to train social scientists to a high standard using appropriate methods of innovative methods. And also, to have and to offer flexible delivery formats. So, that's really of increasing importance, not just because of the pandemic. We can see that, for example, today we have a hybrid event. These types of things are now happening of course.

Just very briefly to mention a number of highlights of NCRM successes. We have a very wide range of training and capacity building activities. So, it's not just about courses or running a few events, but we're having a whole range of training formats that we are advocating and it's really thinking about the fluid transition between research and training effectively. So, we are trying to be creative, innovative, advanced and also ambitious in terms of our delivery.

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So, we had more than 3,500 course participants over the last three years and more than 4,000 event participants and more than a million website users. And we have a number of online learning resources on there that are really having a very high uptake. It's across all ESRC disciplines across the career life course and so on. And we have, for example, started to put together impact case studies and last year we collected about 14 impact case studies which this year and next year we will continue to update and add to. So, we are obviously always extremely keen to hear from you if you had experience with NCRM, maybe you’ve attended a course or an event, what has come out of it, how have you used these methods? Have you maybe changed policy in government or something like that? Please, please email us. We are really interested in hearing the sort of impacts and changes we have been able to put into place.

And also, we're having really positive feedback from course participants, from people that are using our online learning resources. So, we're collecting obviously all of this type of data. They are a number of quotes there where people really feedback the structure of a course or the delivery of a course was of high quality. There are just some numbers here that may be of interest and we had about last year or over the last three years, about 20% of our participants were from actually outside the social sciences, for example, from health and so on. So, we are reaching out to other disciplines as well.

I just wanted to emphasise, obviously we have the portal, the website, which provides a rich online database and there are various different infrastructures and services that people can use. For example, if they want to themselves want training events or want to find out about training events, all of this is on our website. And we, as I said, we have a comprehensive training programme, so you can explore what there is an offer. We have a wide range of activities like spring and autumn schools. Also, largescale events, for example, MethodsCon we've run or innovation fora. There are various collaborative events or events coming out from our key pedagogical workstream, like Training the Trainers, for example. And I want to emphasise the Research Methods Festival that is coming up on the 7th to 9th November this year. So, you can have a look on our website and there are lots of activities there. Last time we had more than 1,000 participants on there.

And we've created a number of networks where people come together, discuss, meet regularly or community of practice or methodological special interest groups that are focusing on particular aspects like, for example, pedagogy or video interviewing or DRTN, which is the Data Resources Training Network or server data collection methods. So, the whole range of activities. Or if you want to create a network yourself and want to generate some activities, then we are always open to try and facilitate that and help people to do that.

Okay. So, now I would like to introduce our key speaker. So, I'm really pleased that Liz, so Professor Elizabeth Stokoe from the LSE has been able to tonight give our annual lecture. She has been at LSE since January and previously she was for I believe 20 years or so, at Loughborough University and had many senior roles there already. She has been researching for many years conversation analysis and basically it focuses on an understanding of how social interaction works. So, I'm really keen to hear about that. It's from first dates to medical communication and from sales encounters to crisis negotiation, for example. She is in fact one of our members on the NCRM Advisory Board, but that's not actually the reason why you're here because Ali Hanbury, our Senior Engagement Manager, was listening I believe to BBC Radio 4, The Life Scientific, and thought you were really an engaging, fantastic speaker and that's how this came about. And we thought, “Okay, this would be a really nice opportunity”.

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So, your work is having a huge impact and, for example, your crisis negotiations and it's also something that that Ali, our Senior Engagement Manager, is particularly interested in, is of particular relevance and of interest. You've published a book I believe last year on crisis talk and you've had 150 research outputs in fact. And books and authors and publications, of course. And you've had various work or you've worked extensively with external partners as well. So, that's obviously relevant to NCRM with the public, third and private sectors. And you've given many talks, for example, on Google, Microsoft, TED and so on. So, it's really nice to see the link between academia and obviously the applied world.

There are many things I could mention. I just wanted to also emphasise obviously during the COVID-19 pandemic you've been able, I'm very impressed by that, to work on the government Scientific Advisory Group or contribute to that, SAGE. And you've been you've been having a number of honours. For example, the Wired Innovation Fellow or you've been awarded the honorary fellowship of the British Psychological Society.

I think there are probably lots of other things I could mention, but in today's talk you will be talking about conversation analysis as a research method. So, obviously that links extremely well to the topic of NCRM. What is it? What is it not? What can conversation analysis actually do? What can it not do? And whether it's a qualitative or quantitative approach. Again, we have many discussions at NCRM about different types of research area activities and how it raises also really interesting questions of how we find out about the social world, conversations that happen around us and so on.

So, maybe on this note, I should hand over to Liz and maybe I'll just go through the slides. Okay. So, on this note I'll hand over to Liz. So, thank you very much, yeah.

[Applause]

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: Okay. Thanks very much, Gabby. And good evening to everybody here in the room at the Royal Society and hello to everybody online as well.

Before we get going properly, I thought I would start with something that should unite any academic in the room, regardless of your discipline, whatever research method you use, whether you're a qualitative research or a quantitative researcher. And that is the ever present problem of Reviewer 2.

So, this title, a Method in Search of a Problem, was inspired by a reviewer, not of a grant, sorry, of a grant rather than a paper, who asked me this question with the intonation that you can probably imagine. “Isn’t conversation analysis just a method in search for a problem?” And of course, they hadn't really thought it through that I am a conversation analyst, so, I'm going to use this question as data forever as an example of why yes/no questions in this case and negative interrogative questions are much more interesting than you might initially think.

I also decided that this is actually quite a good way to describe what I've actually been doing with my own work in conversation analysis for the last 12, 13 or so years, because it's been almost exclusively coproduced with and for non-academic partners with the aim of addressing some kind of conversational or communication problem from healthcare and legal partners through to technology companies and beyond.

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So, damn you, Reviewer 2, but also thank you for this quite interesting way to think about conversation analysis.

I'm not going to talk too much about individual projects today, but I thought I would explain a little bit about what I do across three, sorry, five problem areas that conversation analysis has maybe something interesting to say. Hopefully you'll find it interesting.

So, I'm going to start with a psychology problem, then a details problem, then a communication myth problem, a hard data problem and a conversational products problem. And I will explain what I mean by all of these problems as we encounter each in each section.

So, to start off with then, a psychology problem. And I'm saying psychology because psychology is my home discipline, but you might substitute psychology here for other social science methods when it comes to what it is I want to talk about that is a problem in psychology at least that conversation analysis might address.

So, as Matthias Mehl argues here, “Laypersons often think of psychologists as professional people watchers. It's ironic, then, that in our discipline, actually very little naturally occurring observation takes place”. And this is something that, of course, anyone who is a psychologist will be very familiar with, we’re thought of being kind of nosey parkers who are just observing everything all the time.

But in fact, we tend not to look at naturally occurring behaviour where all the juicy things of life actually happen. Instead, psychologists simulate it, they ask people to report upon it later on surveys and interviews and so on.

And so, as Mehl continues, “The psychological scientist’s toolkit should have something, a method to directly observe daily life where moment to moment behaviour naturally happens”.

Conversation analysis has been providing this toolkit for over 50 years. Its origins, for those of you who don't know, are in sociology. It was imported into my home discipline of psychology through discursive psychology, and of course there are CA scholars in in pretty much all disciplines, but maybe particularly anthropology, communication and media linguistics and so on with applications far and wide.

So, what actually is conversation analysis? It's much more than a toolkit. It's a theory of and method for studying human sociality. Conversation analysts study social interaction in the wild as it happens. Not simulated, not role played, not experimentally produced, not reported upon post hoc in surveys or on interviews. Our primary data, therefore, are recordings. And what we do with the recordings is then transcribe them using a universal technical system that permits a very fine grained analysis of what people are saying as well as how they're saying it and when in the conversation they're saying it, at what pace, with what intonation, with what in aggregate embodied conduct. All of the things that produce social interaction.

And I've often used the metaphor of a conversational race track to think about how talk works, that the idea that conversations have a kind of landscape to them, an architecture, a structure, and they unfold turn by turn, one thing coming after another and one turn at talk affording or constraining the next thing that happens.

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So, in any given interaction, we move through what we might think of as projects. So, like openings or reportings or advisings or offerings or requesting or closing. And people often think that real talk is just too messy to capture and study in any kind of scientific way. And yet when you zoom out and look at the whole conversational race track, the whole architecture, the whole landscape, you can start to discern the components and its systematic structure.

When it comes to these sorts of projects that happen along the race track, any one of them can be done smoothly with no misunderstanding or they can be full of miscommunication and tension and friction. So, I've looked at lots of different race tracks from people on first dates through to police interviews with suspects, crisis negotiation, people talking, using technology. Lots of different settings.

So, to bring us back to Mehl's, quote, the whole point of conversation analysis is to study moment to moment behaviour naturally occurring as it happens in the wild. And for conversation analysts, this moment to moment detail is really important. And as Schegloff here says, who's one of the founders of the discipline, “Social science theorising must be answerable to the details of actual, natural occurrences”. It's quite a challenge for a lot of social science.

This emphasis on detail brings us to Problem 2. The problem of detail. One of the reasons people often articulate for doing qualitative research is to enfranchise and empower the real voices of participants. So, eliciting people’s accounts and experiences in their own words, in their own voices, to generate this rich data. Yet when you look at reported research in qualitative methods, quite often, not always, but quite often the detail of what people say, their actual voice, and especially how and where in an encounter they say things, those things are stripped away along with the occasion they have for saying it in the first place, by which I mean what the interviewer asks or how the question was worded.

Conversation analysts, for some, is one of the soggiest of social science methods with its focus on details and gaps and pauses and these tiny things in social interaction. And we're accused of rather than stripping detail away, of including far too much detail and therefore avoiding being able to see or say anything about the big picture.

This thing about CA having a focus on too much detail often reminds me of the apocryphal story of Mozart and what apparently Emperor Joseph II supposedly said after the performance of one of his operas. “Too many notes, dear Mozart, too many notes.” And Mozart's reply apparently was, “Just as many as necessary, Your Majesty”.

So, here, obviously there's quite a lot of detail on this manuscript. If you haven't seen one before, here's a conversation analyst’s transcript produced using a system developed 50 years ago by Gail Jefferson, another founder of the field. And actually, I quite like music as an analogy for some of what we do because, like Jefferson, both systems are standard, they're universal, and if you know how to use them you can represent sound and then do things with that representation as well as the original score.

I want to show you why details are important. So, this transcript that is here, you won't be able, don't worry about seeing it in detail at this point. What you're looking at is a transcript of a leaked audio recording of an off-air conversation about five years ago between John Humphrys, BBC Radio 4 Today presenter at the time, and John Sopel, another journalist. And they were talking off-air, leaked, about another colleague, Carrie Gracie. And you might remember Carrie Gracie had resigned from the BBC in the context of a gender pay gap at the organisation. So, this was a big story, the recording was online, and BuzzFeed reported the story and made a transcript and already what I'm just hoping you can see just by eyeballing, is that those transcripts are quite different.

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So, to keep going with the music analogy just for a minute, one is the easy to play version whereas the other is the original composition.

So, let's now look at just one little bit of the transcript. So, again, in a way you don't really need to see the detail too much, but what you can hopefully see is that according to the BuzzFeed transcript at this point in the conversation, only John Humphrys was talking, whereas when you transcribe it using more, put more detail in, what you can actually see is that John Sopel was participating quite a lot in this encounter. So, lots of basically sort of supportive laughter, affiliative laughter and so on. And we know, for example, from other conversation analytic research that if someone’s saying something obnoxious, one thing you can do is stay silent and that will probably stop them and make them change their trajectory or something like that. But if you laugh along with it, then they'll probably keep going.

So, this is one of those moments where the detail is telling you a slightly different story compared to the transcript that was the one that was sort of popular online. And even more interesting, maybe, and I'm not remotely defending John Humphrys, heaven forbid. But all the headlines pretty much were about Humphrys rather than Sopel.

Now, the reason that I'm showing you this is that conversation analytic methods partly get their power by simply exposing, specifying and explicating things that are happening. And sometimes these differences in something like an orthographic transcript and a technical transcript are really important. So, my colleague at Loughborough, Emma Richardson, has shown how different police interviews, you know, recorded police interviews are when they're transcribed orthographically for the legal process, compared to a conversation analyst’s transcript. And you can probably now imagine the kinds of things that would be different there that might be quite important to know.

The technical detail is also important for doing analysis. So, I'm going to give you an example of how a tiny detail in a transcript cracked open a whole analysis.

So, a few years ago, well, quite a long time ago now when I think about it, I was conducting some research on neighbour disputes with a colleague, Derek Edwards. And our initial interest in neighbour disputes was, “Okay, how do we study something like neighbour relationships? How do we study them in a naturally occurring environment?” So, we got access to community mediation sessions where the mediators were trying to help the parties in dispute. And then initial inquiry calls into mediation services, calls into the local authority, local council, calls to environmental health services and police interviews where suspects have been arrested in the case of a nuclear, sorry, a neighbour dispute gone nuclear or semi-nuclear.

Our research originally focused on how matters of identity creep into neighbour disputes. So, how an ostensible noise dispute starts somewhere along that conversation to turn into something about the kind of person who's living next door. And we got really interested in matters of ageism and racism, and particularly how they were handled by institutional parties.

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Towards the end of the study, I became particularly interested in these initial inquiry calls to community mediation services themselves and the fact that, despite mediators offering a free service to people in dispute, many of these calls ended with the person saying no to mediation. So, somewhere along this conversation, people either got engaged with the process or said no to the process. So, what is it that's going on in this sort of naturally occurring laboratory situation where the outcome is an endogenous feature of the encounter? And these are all real calls. It's not actors pretending to have a neighbour dispute. We're not asking people about their neighbour disputes. The mediators aren't doing training. Everyone is in a real call where the stakes are those particularly real stakes.

So, initial inquiry calls, zooming out and thinking about the whole arc of these telephone conversations, they started off with Project 1, opening the call, establishing you're in the right place. Project 2 explaining what the problem is with next door. A big story about somebody horrendous who lived next door to you. And then Project 3 where the mediator starts to explain what mediation is. And because people don't know what mediation is, this always happened at some point along the telephone call.

And so, I wanted to zoom in on Project 3 because this seemed to be one of the points at which people started to disengage with the idea of mediating.

So, I'm going to give you an example, as I say, of why detail matters in understanding how mediators failed or succeeded in getting this Project 3 right, this explanation of mediation.

So, I'd found two things. First of all, mediators always explain mediation. And they did it in one of two ways. They either explained mediation with a sort of philosophy behind it, the sort of ethos of mediation. They'd say, “We don't take sides, it's impartial, it's voluntary. We don't have any power”. They'd explain the sort of why they do mediation. Or they would explain mediation as a process. So, this happens and then this happens and then this happens. So, that was the first thing. And callers typically engaged in a process type of explanation but not an ethos or a philosophical type of explanation.

The second thing was that callers would resist mediation and start to disengage in maybe three or four fairly routine kind of ways. One and one of them was saying that they don't want their neighbour to know they've been complaining about them, which you could probably imagine is a very common thing that you might expect people to say.

So, I'm now going to show you a mediator explaining mediation to a prospective client in a way that proves successful, the process based explanation. And as it comes out, you're going to see the clip come out line by line with an anonymised recording and a transcript. And I want you to just watch for this little tiny detail that would probably not be present in an ordinary transcript, but it turned out to be quite important for where I started looking at these calls. So, hopefully, the audio will work and here it comes.

[Audio recording]

Mediator: We're a mediation project in the area.

Caller: Yeah.

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Mediator: And what we try to help neighbours that are in dispute, what we do first is send a letter out to your neighbour straightaway to say that we've been in touch with you.

Caller: Yeah.

Mediator: And ask them whether they would get in touch with us so that we can discuss it with them.

Caller: Yeah.

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: And it goes on. And this person agrees to mediate at the end of the call.

So, I'm hoping that you can see that the detail really matters because what we have at the start of line six is this little thing that conversation analysts call repair where the mediator starts to say probably what we do first, we write out a letter to your neighbour straightaway just to say that you… where was that headed? You've been in touch with us, but immediately deletes that and swaps it for, “We've been in touch with you,” making the mediation centre the agent of things happening in the life of the people in dispute to try and design out one of the regular objections, which is, “But won't they know I've been complaining if you say it the other way?”

So, the detail here really matters. And this was one of, you know, an early, very early bit of transcript that I was looking at and listening to. And just noticing not only does this tiny detail matter, but it's also starting to show us something about the mediator’s tacit expertise and experience. The mediator here is catching herself before she does the thing that is most likely to lead to one of the very things that people object to along these conversational race tracks.

So, the next step was to go through all of the materials and have a look at all of the Project 3s, all of the explanations of mediation and start to figure out what is it that seems to get people turned on, or what did they object to?

And so, I did lots of talks to mediators. I started saying that I've got something interesting to show you, mediators, some of them I've been working with, some by word of mouth. And at some point I crossed over from community mediation to family mediation and was finding lots of similar sorts of barriers to people agreeing to mediate in those initial inquiry calls.

And this was me presenting ten years ago at a conference for family lawyers and mediators. And at the time, the Ministry of Justice had a new campaign to promote family mediation. And I was pretty critical on this stage of some of the messaging that was in this animated video because I knew that in real calls rather than maybe in a focus group or just by how do people put these things together? This sounds right, or this will probably get them in or I'm a mediator and I know what works? But actually, I kind of knew that these ways of explaining mediation, lots of ethos, probably aren't going to get people to engage in the process.

And so, it turned out that somebody from the Ministry of Justice was in the audience. I wasn't really expecting that. But shortly after they invited me to come and work with their communication team. And so, we redesigned the video and related posters. And it even found its way to the US Superior Courts Mediation Service because I'd gone to the States and talked to mediation services over there as well.

So, overall, this work underpinned lots of training for mediators, which turned out to be very much in demand because really until this point no one was even focused on what goes on to try and get people into mediation. All of their training and development was all around being a mediator. But of course, if you don't have clients, if you can't get people into mediation, then you won't be able to survive as a service.

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So, the detail matters. And another quote here from the founder of conversation analysis. "If you can't deal with the actual details of actual events, then you can't have a science of social life." Detail matters.

This moves me on to my next problem, a communication myths problem. So, it's a very strange thing in a way to do any kind of public science or science communication about conversation, because the phenomenon itself is very ordinary. No one needs to be a conversation analyst to have a conversation. So, talking about talking to audiences like yourselves, but probably not like yourselves, but just more generally, it's a weird one. And it's not like being a scientist of something like a black hole because a black hole doesn't exist in the first place for humans to understand it. But conversation, communication, discourse, it's only there for us to understand each other.

And so, we all have our lifetime's experience of interacting with each other, and thus we have a lot of anecdata about how we think it all works.

But something odd does happen between us actually doing the talking and then sort of going meta to talk about how talk works. And it's not just in our everyday anecdotes that communication myths begin to solidify and take on a life of their own. So, this is one of my favourite facts about communication. You've probably seen something like this on a slide somewhere else before, or someone will have told you that, "Didn't you know that communication is 93% nonverbal and only 7% verbal?" So, this kind of thing that I see all the time, especially when I'm in other training events.

So, you may or may not have seen this. If you've seen it, you may or may not know that the original writer of the research that this gets massively transformed from, Albert Mehrabian, has spent at least a decent chunk of his career trying to get people to stop quoting the thing. There is a very compelling stat, we all do love a stat and a pie chart, and you feel like you've learned something. "Oh, communication, 7% words". But actually, in this particular interview, he's talking to a sociologist, Max Atkinson. And one of the things that they discuss is how easy it is to make this thing fall over, because if communication was only 7% words, how come radio is so popular? Or how come we can talk in the dark? Or how come when I go to France I can't get by 93% of the time just fine? I do need some words.

This is not, of course, to say that embodied conduct and intonation and those things are not also crucial, but sadly this detail tells us that this stat is a bit of a myth. So, there are lots of these myths around, and at least one of the things that I've been trying to do over the last few years is get people to just engage with people actually talking. What are we so scared of? Let's look at what people are actually doing when they talk to each other.

And this brings us to the fourth problem. The problem of hard data. So, this is hopefully going to start to put together some of the themes that we've encountered so far in the talk.

So, a couple of years ago I wrote an article with some other conversation analysts called the Softness of Hard Data. And a bit like this talk today, the title of that article was inspired by a critic, in this case a critic of qualitative research.

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So, a professor on Twitter was being critical of a piece of Swedish research on children and long COVID. And this is what they said. “Is there any data in there or is it just a list of anecdotes?” So, they were taken to task by another professor and eventually the critic came back with this. “I appreciate this was poorly worded. My point was more whether we should give that much weight to qualitative studies on long COVID in children before we have collected any hard data.”

The sort of binary of hard and soft data, words versus numbers, qualitative, quantitative, it's very familiar to many of us.

But what does it actually mean to generate hard data? And how does social interaction and conversation maybe get in the way? So, a great deal of research data, as we all know, is generated by questions. So, qualitative and quantitative data comes often in response to questions and it also comes from the interactions between the researcher and the participant in the experiment and the participant. But we know, not just from conversation analysis, but just from our own tacit understanding of language that the way questions are constructed, each word and their grammar afford and constrain the things that are going to happen next. The data that is collected next in response.

So, one of my favourite examples of this isn't conversation analytic research, but a classic cognitive psychology study that I remember learning about during my own degree, and it's the work of Elizabeth Loftus and colleagues on eyewitness reports and eyewitness testimony in experimental settings.

So, they basically asked their participants to watch a video recording of a car accident. And then they asked the participants to estimate the speed at which the car was travelling. And then they read the verb in the question. And you can of see where this is going. So, depending on the verb choice, people made different estimates of how fast the car was travelling.

One week later, they then went back and asked participants whether or not there was any glass at the scene, whether they'd seen glass. There was no glass at the scene, but those people who had heard the smashed version of the question were more likely to report seeing glass at the scene than those who'd had the bumped version of the question.

So, of course, there's all sorts of very interesting applications and implications of Elizabeth Loftus's work. And she's done tremendous things to make us understand eyewitness testimony and also things that we might call leading questions and so on.

But let's take this down a slightly different trajectory. What if we now replaced “any” in this question with “some”. And was there some glass at the scene? What might we expect if we just change another word in the question? Well, it might increase the number of participants reporting that they observed glass. Why am I saying this?

So, in one study that's become really famous I think in conversation analytic circles, conducted by John Heritage and colleagues in the US, showed that in primary care settings they conducted a randomised control trial, one word difference in something that the doctor said to the patients reduced patients’ unmet concerns in this particular setting. So, in primary care, doctors typically open the consultation with, “What can I do for you today?” and patients typically formulate one thing in response. And this issue that patients might typically say one thing, even if they've got more than one thing on their mind, bearing in mind this is a US context where you, you know, we know that we're all discouraged from having anything currently in the UK. But anyway, “What can I do for you today?” We know that people say one thing, so doctors are trained to ask, “Is there anything else that I can do for you today or anything else on your mind?”

[0:41:48]

And what they did was establish patient groups with more than one thing to discuss by asking them before on a survey. And in one arm of the trial, the doctors asked after the initial problem presentation. “And is there anything else?” and in the other arm, “And is there something else?” or variations like that. And this is because conversation analytic research shows that the polarity of questions will tilt the response that you get. So, you're more likely to see no responses to anything questions and yes responses to something questions due to the fact that you can basically say, “Yes, I have something,” but you can't say, “Yes I have anything”. It’s that kind of grammatical push, this kind of pushing and pulling of language that we're not really very aware of, and yet it's happening.

And this is what they found. A substantially higher number of people responding with another concern if they were asked the something version of the question than the anything version of the question.

So, some or any altered what happened next on the conversational race track of a primary care consultation. Some patients leave with unmet concerns feeling dissatisfied, and then maybe needing to make another appointment.

So, in my own work, and particularly in collaboration with Rein Ove Sikveland, we've studied different race tracks, different contexts, and found some other surprising things about the difference that words can make.

So, for example, in work on crisis negotiation where we were studying police negotiators, talking to or trying to just even get talking to people in crisis, maybe they're stood on a roof or they're about to do themselves some serious harm, we found that when negotiators started with, “I'd like to talk to you,” they got far more resistance than they formulated a dialogue proposal with the verb to speak. And so, at the start of the negotiation, if they use “speak” rather than “talk,” they would get further faster than if they started with “talk”. And we were using recordings of actual negotiations happening and the crisis negotiators will eventually find their way through to the thing that is going to engage the person in crisis. And clearly they don't already know that one thing is making a difference, because if this was already available to them as a as a strategy, especially at the start of the negotiation, they would just start with it.

But what we're doing is able to look at the actual conversations, what is it that people are doing, those people who are really experienced and expert? What is it that they're doing? And then identify and describe and share it.

Something else that we found at the other end of the conversation, back to those mediation intake calls, is that callers who were asked if they were willing to mediate were more likely to become clients than those who were asked if they were interested in mediating or would like to mediate. And the placement of this example at the end of the conversation isn't just a design thing about the slide to fill the space. It's the actually “willing” worked at the end of the call. So, if mediators asked people at the start of the call whether they were willing to mediate, they didn't get as strong an uptake or they would get resistance, whereas at the end of the call, especially after resistance, “willing” would get that turnaround point and the caller would become a client.

[0:45:12]

So, it's not just the words you use, and of course it's also the kind of action that you, you can't just say, “Talk,” and people will talk or speak or willing. There has to be, it's embedded in something. But where it happens in the conversation matters as well.

Another place where interaction might get in the way of hard data collection is in the laboratory itself, in the gold standard environment for collecting reliable and valid quantitative datasets. But there's very little scrutiny of what actually happened inside the black box of experimentation. And I guess most of you will be familiar with the clip that's playing here on the screen. It's Milgram’s work on obedience to authority. Very, very widely discussed across psychology and the social sciences for all sorts of reasons.

But in the last ten years or so, researchers have gained access to Milgram archives, which included lots and lots of recordings of the experiments taking place. And until this point, as one of the researchers says, we didn't really know very much about the detail of what was going on in the Milgram laboratory. And what they found was that basically unlike what we might expect when we read about experimental methods where everything is kind of done the same way over and over again to reduce problematic variables creeping in, in fact, participants could draw the experimenter into a process of negotiation over the continuation of the experimental session resulting in radical departures from the standardised experimental procedure.

There are many examples across conversation and analytic research across all of our disciplines that show all sorts of things like we think this is standardised, but when you look at the encounter, it isn't. Or we think there's a rubric being followed to the letter on the page, but when you look at the interaction, it isn't. The interactional imperative gets in the way. And hard data becomes increasingly less hard or just maybe more interesting.

So, to go back to the critic of qualitative data and the proponent of hard data, maybe we're going to flip this criticism and instead say how much weight should we give to quantitative studies that relate to complex real world problems and processes until we understand something of the ways in which the data were collected.

Okay. Final section focuses on what I'm calling conversational products, by which I mean things that people do to of leverage conversation and communication in various applied ways. So, if you're designing communication guidance or training or you're assessing people's communication skills or you're building AI augmented conversational systems, what kinds of talk should we be training or assessing or scripting? Especially since conversation analysis tells us that we don't really know how we talk when we go meta on it and our research yields empirically grounded results at variance with how we think we do things in conversation.

So, let's start with a very basic action, something that we all do in conversation, a request. And I want you to imagine that you need to ask for a lift because your car's broken down. So, you're phoning a friend, you're asking for a lift. How are you going to do it? Let's have a look at people doing that.

[Audio recording]

Marsha: Hello?

[0:48:51]

Donny: Hello, Marsha.

Marsha: Yeah.

Donny: It’s Donny.

Marsha: Hi, Donny.

Donny: Guess what?

Marsha: What?

Donny: My car is stalled. And I’m up here in the Glen.

Marsha: Oh.

Donny: And I don't know if it’s possible, but see I have to open up the bank at, in Brentwood.

Marsha: Yeah. And I know you want, and I will, and I would, but except I've got to leave in about five minutes.

Donny: Okay then, I’ve got to call somebody else right away. Okay?

Marsha: Okay, Don.

Donny: Thanks a lot. Bye.

Marsha: Bye.

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: Okay. So, all you hopefully need to see about this is a very basic point which is there's no explicit request and there's no explicit declination, yet it's completely understandable by the parties there’s a request for something and a declination of that thing and if you're not picking that up, we need to talk later about your communication skills.

(Laughter)

Okay, so there's a request for a lift. What about making a request for service at the vet’s? Here's a couple of examples of callers phoning the vet about their pet.

[Audio recording]

Caller: Hi, I got a new puppy the other day. I was just wondering how much it would cost to get the jabs done, please.

Caller: Hello, I wonder if it’s possible to make an appointment for my cat tomorrow for a follow up. He’s had an operation.

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: So, you might see some differences between these two calls. First one requires the receptionist to provide a price. Second one requires the receptionist to navigate the appointment system and try to navigate that with the caller’s calendar. The second one is the most common kind of request, the appointment. The first one is not a common request, unless you're a mystery shopper phoning to test out and report back on how good this person is at taking your call. And it turns out that mystery shoppers playing the part of pet owners aren't actually very good at playing the part of pet owners.

[0:50:46] (Laughter)

If you just hear one, you probably don't know that you're talking to a mystery shopper, but when you start to look at quite a lot, you start to see that mystery shoppers just don't give the same kinds of requests in the same kinds of ways to the people who are taking their call. Yet at the same time, they are going to go back and report on how good that service was. You could argue that's quite outrageous. No one's really looking at what the mystery shoppers are doing.

And then you can also maybe see through those technical transcripts that there are some other little details there that also varied systematically. So, if you're a mystery shopper, you're more likely to ask about a pet. But if you're phoning about your animal, you're more likely to talk about my dog. If you are a mystery shopper, you're more likely to stumble in the production of the kind of animal, as you can see there, new puppy. Whereas if you're a real pet owner, you are still likely to do ums and ahs, but they're going to be somewhere else. They're more likely to be in the bit where you talk about the service that you want.

So, we're starting to see again the detail matters and maybe it doesn't matter that much, but I think some of these things really do matter. And the more serious and high stakes settings that you start to look at, you start to see is it okay that we are passing and failing people, for example, in the simulation, in this particular environment, this particular cohort of medics or whatever it is on the basis of things that we imagine people should be doing in conversation.

Okay, what about if you're designing the way Alexa or a conversational user interface asks a question? You might give its voice rising intonation, right? Have a listen to this. This is a patient. These are real. Don’t worry I'm not going – this is a real patient and a real receptionist asking each other questions on the phone.

[Audio recording]

Patient: I was wondering if I could make an appointment please.

Receptionist: Is it something urgent or routine?

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: Through the anonymisation you should be able to hear that those are both questions and they both have falling intonation at the end. So, while some questions do have rising intonation, many don’t. And it was this nugget of something that is every conversation analyst knows that I'd written about in a book on conversational analysis and which had a section on myth busting that a woman from Google, Cathy Pearl, who was at the time the lead conversation designer for the Google Assistant, had found and got in touch to say, “I'm going to tweak the voice of the Google Assistant when it's asking questions, and guess what, now it sounds more authentic”.

So, myself and Cathy and my other colleague here, Saul Albert, are starting to try to bring together the worlds of conversation design which are everywhere writing your chat bots and conversation analysis, so that you can just figure out how it is that people talk. So, if you're getting these assistants to ask questions that they sound authentic, it's the way we actually do it. Alexa and Amazon haven't encountered our services yet, so here's an Alexa asking a question of the day. And this is from Saul Albert's data.

[0:53:51]

[Audio recording]

Alexa: Which is the following country flags does not include a cross?

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: If that doesn't sound weird to you then again, you're not really listening to where the intonation is generally going at the end of a question.

So, if we actually do falling intonation, we produce it when we're asking questions, but we imagine something else because people just tell us that questions have that rising intonation. Then, of course, like here where we're risking building all sorts of biases and myths into conversation design, as well as failing to just, you know, let's again why are we running away from looking at how people actually talk and trying to build some of that? You know, there's 50 years’ worth of research we could be building into these kinds of products.

Final example is a call to 911 emergency services. I'm going to play it and just let you think about it as it rolls out. And as it rolls out, I want you to ask yourself at what point and how come the police dispatcher is starting to figure out what's going on in this call. And I suppose I especially want you to watch out for points of overlap where the talkers are talking at the same time. So, here it comes.

[Audio recording]

Dispatcher: 911, operator 911. Where's the emergency?

Caller: 127 Denir.

Dispatcher: Okay, what's going on there?

Caller: I'd like to order a pizza for delivery.

Dispatcher: Ma’am, you've reached 911. This is an emergency line.

Caller: Yeah, large with half pepperoni, half mushroom.

Dispatcher: You know you’ve called 911. This is an emergency line.

Caller: Do you know how long it’ll be?

Dispatcher: Okay, ma'am. Is everything okay over there? Do you have an emergency or not?

Caller: Yes.

Dispatcher: And you're unable to talk because…

Caller: Right. Right.

Dispatcher: Okay, is there someone in the room with you? Just say yes or no.

Caller: Yes.

Dispatcher: Okay, it looks like I have an officer about a mile from your location. Are there any weapons in your house?

[0:55:50]

Caller: No.

Dispatcher: Can you stay on the phone with me?

Caller: No. See you soon. Thank you.

Professor Elizabeth Stokoe: So, people often imagine that the reason that this police dispatcher knows that this is a genuine request is because they're calling the police. So, you can ask for a pizza, and because you're calling the police, they will kind of figure it out because the context gives you the answer. But actually, you may not know that a lot of calls to the police are not genuine. They're malicious, they're accidental, they're a nuisance type of call. And so, one of the big tasks of the dispatchers is to figure out which of these calls are genuine. So, just because you put some words into a conversation to the police doesn't mean that you're going to be treated as making a genuine request for assistance, as we see in this case here.

We can also start to see the points at which the dispatcher starts to figure it out, and one of the things that is very interesting that we have started to see in other calls as well is these moments of overlap. So, how do you sound like you're ordering pizza to the person who is overhearing you and is in the house. But at the same time, the person who is on the other end of the conversation can hear you as genuinely requiring assistance. And you can see that these overlaps, these placements of these turns is definitely key to it because when we look at other calls where there is, as far as we know, it's a genuine nuisance call, if you like, or we see calls like this, the overlaps are present or absent and it seems to be a real component feature of how do you be, how do you show that you're being something else to the person on the other end of the phone?

So, we've written a couple of things about this. So, with Saul and William Housley, we've looked at this call in relation to how do you think about this in relation to designing conversational user interfaces and so on? So, what happens if you ask Alexa, “I'd like to order a pizza for delivery”. You can all go and try it tonight, but it's not going to send the police. And how would you ever get an Alexa to understand that level of pragmatic purpose in a conversation? Maybe we'll get there, but you can see the challenges when you think about back to even how do you ask for a lift and how do you say no to a lift when no one asked for a lift and no one said no to a lift and yet we totally understand that that was happening.

And then in a more recent paper with Emma Richardson, we looked at how is it that callers managed, and call takers somehow together managed to hear, despite the fact that I'm not asking you for help, you are able to hear that I'm genuinely asking for help. And so, we've got another nice example of very like the pizza one in British data, where the caller starts by saying, “Hi, how are you?” You know that totally pointless thing that happens at the start of conversations that tell you nothing and everyone's meant to lie? If they weren't there at the start of conversations in ways that are totally hearable as talking to a friend, then that caller wouldn't have been able to sound like she was talking to her friend to the person who was in the room.

So, to come to a conclusion then, three quick points to reiterate. We talked about the problem of psychology, this issue that's very interesting to me as a psychologist over the years and to see how much of what we imagine psychologists are up to doesn't really figure in academic psychology. You know, it's a constant source of disappointment to friends that I'm not actually analysing them all the time and I can't help them with their dreams and all of those things. But at the same time, conversation analysts are there to do some of the work that we might imagine psychologists are doing.

[0:59:39]

When it comes to things like conversational products, conversation analysts can identify, describe, and share what communication or experience or expertise or effective practices, what do they actually look like?

And then finally we all talk, but we maybe don't really know how post hoc on reflection it's really strange when we go meta. So, nullius in verba, which I learned when I was putting this talk to together today, is the Royal Society's motto and it means or is taken to mean take nobody's word for it until you've seen the evidence. So, thank you.

[Applause]

Dr Jon Sutton: Did you enjoy that? Okay, well now you get just five minutes of me. I'm Dr Jon Sutton. I am a chartered psychologist as well as editor of The Psychologist, the magazine of the British Psychological Society. You can find us on Twitter at psychmag, where I've done a bit of a thread there while Liz was talking about some of the articles that cover her work.

But I'll start with a bit of a confession, I suppose. A bit of irony maybe that I'm acting as discussant here because I left academia 23 years ago, in large part because I felt hopelessly out of my depth when it came to research methods. So, it's feels strange being discussed in a National Centre for Research Methods award lecture.

Even back then, as a PhD student and in the year or so that followed, I wanted to tell stories. I knew that methods and analysis were going to be central to how I told those stories around my own research, and even to knowing what stories were out there waiting to be discovered. And I understood that scraping by with a bit of Spearman’s Rank and ANOVA wasn't going to be conducive to telling stories that really engaged and informed a wide audience.

So, I jumped ship to edit The Psychologist, which was effectively telling stories of psychology. And back in 2013, we got to hear Liz's story in the magazine. And ever since then, I've been drawn to her work and to conversation analysis in general. And I thought that some consideration of why might allow me to reflect briefly on the lecture that we've just heard and set us up for questions.

So, there's three reasons I think. And the first is that I'm engaged by change. As Will Storr writes in the Science of Storytelling, we all are from the very first single celled organism, we have evolved to detect and respond to change. We are change detectors and it's there, it's everywhere in stories. And once you know that and you start seeing it, particularly at the start of all sorts of books and films.

It's also there in many of the articles that have kind of done best on our website, on The Psychologist’s website. So, for example, Annie Hickox wrote for us in 2019, and I'm just going to read to you briefly how that piece started. And I always point out that I didn't edit this at all. This was exactly how it how it came in. So, she starts, “I was cooking dinner one balmy sweet-scented summer evening when our daughter Jane called me. Phone calls, particularly on the house phone, were not our two daughters preferred form of communication. I was accustomed to long strings of WhatsApp messages or even days of silence when Jane and her older sister, Alice, were busy with studies, work or friends in London. I figured Jane was calling to discuss the plans they had made for their upcoming trip to work in the States over the summer. Sometimes a real time discussion is best for finetuning and planning. After her initial hello, I couldn't hear her voice. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked. There was a pause and then, ‘Mum, I can't do anything’. I gently asked her what she meant, but my heart already ached with knowing”.

[1:04:13]

So, in that example, something has clearly changed and actually I think is about to change. And of course, I also use this example because I thought it's the kind of exchange that Liz might study herself. She might want to examine the length of that pause. She'd probably notice the hello as a kind of stark and unusual way of opening a call.

And that leads me to the second reason why I think I'm particularly drawn to Liz's work. I love that she studies those moment to moment behaviours, little vignettes and scenes which tend to be part of a bigger picture. So, it's the actual detail of actual events, as she said. The seemingly trivial and mundane that on closer examination is anything but. So, nothing that means everything.

I love that Alexa Hepburn studies burps and Stuart Reeves, as you heard there, considers how we talk to Alexa. Not Hepburn. That got confusing. And Anne Wetherill, who I think is here somewhere, hi Anne, has listened out for that sharp intake of breath that a GP might do as they examine you.

To me, this is psychology at its best. I sometimes think we psychologists are the Wombles of science. So, if you're not a child of the 70s, you probably won't have any idea what I'm talking about there. But basically, in the words of the theme tune, we're making good use of the things that we find, things that the everyday folks leave behind.

And Liz put that much better when she said conversation analysis addresses the Mehl Baumeister problem of psychology.

And I think thirdly and finally I'm drawn to contrast and contradiction. So, I like happy music with words about sad things or vice versa. You know, posh burgers, overthinking Love Island, which is something that Liz and I have in common. So, what has kept me interested in stories of psychology I think for so long is that we're constantly encountering hard data that turns out to be rather soft, soft data that perhaps we should consider hard. Truths that might be myths and heroes who become villains. Quests that have dead ends and wrong turns. And this is all the stuff of storytelling and conversation analysis has some ripping yarns.

So, to conclude, in terms of a method in search of a problem, in life, in psychology, there are always problems and I hope that you, like me, have been convinced by the power of conversation analysis in finding real people living real lives and giving them a voice to tell their stories and actually doing something about those problems.

[Applause]

Professor Gabriele Durrant: Thank you very, very much. I think it was a really brilliant talk, very, very engaging discussion, fantastic questions from the audience both online and face to face. So, I'm really thanking you very, very much everyone for coming and for taking part online as well. So, thank you very, very much.

[Applause]

[End of Transcript]