Conversation analysis: a reflexive methodology for critical psychology

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Abstract. This paper considers the potential value of conversation analysis (CA) as a reflexive methodology for critical psychology. Following an outline of constructs within ethnomethodologically inspired CA, a number of implications for critical development in psychology are outlined. Noting the increasing use of CA within psychology, discussion touches on the reflexivity inherent in this methodological enterprise, and its tendency towards theoretical closure. The suggestion is made however, that `doing CA` encourages an understanding of reflexive practice by requiring a critical awareness of participant-oriented methods for `making sense of` everyday activities. Whether CA can contribute towards facilitating a post-structuralist criticality is then considered, followed by concluding comments on the potential advantages of CA for critical psychology.

Key words: conversation analysis, reflexivity, ethnomethodology

Critical psychology aims to challenge the dominant theories and perspectives in psychology and work towards redressing the injustices, misrepresentations and implicit ideological imbalances endemic to academic and professional practice. Numerous writers voice dissatisfaction at some of the more insidious methodological procedures and practices in psychology, techniques which in large part position people as `objects of study` some distance from the psychologist as investigator. In this paper I aim to work up the proposal that the ethnomethodologically inspired reflexivity of conversation analysis (CA) may provide a conceptually rich methodological framework for critical psychologists interested in extending psychology`s boundaries and engaging with contemporary critical thought.

The main reason why a reflexive outlook sympathetic to critical psychology can be

encouraged through using CA is because of the concern it has with participants own orientations to the meaning making practices of everyday life. However, such an aim is likely to be achieved only if care is taken to recognise, and critically engage with, the positivistic tendencies of CA as a method, and the restrictive professionalism it can exhibit as a sub-discipline specialism. Although doing CA can engender a deep appreciation of the artful achievement of people`s ordinary and everyday talk, it can also give rise to a seduction with the `data` - engendering an uncritical methodological fantasy that the structures and procedures identified by the analyst `capture` and constitute the reality of social encounters. In tracing out a critical commentary of CA I aim to suggest one or two ways in which this methodology can contribute to the foundational basis of critical psychology primarily by building upon the reflexivity CA inherits from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Czyzewski, 1989; Potter, 1996).

In order to understand the reflexivity CA engenders, a number of comments on CA`s ethnomethodological foundations can serve as a useful starting position. This will help firm out a background for the proposal that CA could be of particular value to critical psychology if it encourages a critical orientation to it`s own procedures and avoid a tendency towards methodological closure. Following a short outline of ethnomethodology, CA and an example formulation of particular value to critical psychology (membership categorisation devices), the discussion touches on two constructs which have particular resonance in psychology more generally: reflexivity and intersubjectivity. Why CA opens up a critical psychological window on other more traditional areas of the discipline is then considered, followed by a brief discussion on whether CA may be a methodological project of potential value to post-structural perspectives. A number of concluding comments focus on the shortcoming and possibilities of CA as a reflexive methodology for critical psychology.

Ethnomethodology and CA

The dissatisfaction that critical psychology has with the mainstream discipline bears some similarities to criticisms voiced by a small number of sociologists during the 1960`s who broke away from mainstream sociology developing what became known as ethnomethodology. Significant in this development were the writings of Schultz

(1962) who argued that the social world is fundamentally an intersubjective one, a living context of everyday routines, where most of our activities are accomplished mechanically (non-cognitively), and reality natural and obvious. Prominent also was Garfinkel, who outlined the ethnomethdological research principle, emphasising that:

> The objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used and taken for granted is …a fundamental phenomenon (Garfinkel, 1967:II).

The `taken for granted` intersubjectively known facts of everyday life became the central focus of this perspective. Defining ethnomethodology as a scientific project, Coulon (1995, p. 1) suggests the aim is,

> to analyze the methods, or the procedures, that people use for conducting the different affairs that they accomplish in their daily lives. Ethnomethodology is the analysis of the ordinary methods that people use to realise their ordinary actions.

In other words, the object of enquiry should be `the set of techniques that the members of a society themselves utilise to interpret and act within their own social world.` (Levinson, 1983, p. 295). Ethnomethodology can be defined as the study of `ethnic` (the participant`s own) methods of production and interpretation of social interaction. As others have noted, within psychology wherever language or communication is the object of enquiry analysts have tended to uncritically adopt procedures which formulate the production of categorical abstractions, subsequently forming the analytic basis of participants discourse (Edwards, 1997). In contrast, instead of assuming that people follow rules (however conceived by the analyst), the aim is to articulate the methods which the actors themselves use to `actualise` whatever rules, conventions or normative practices they may be oriented to. To quote Coulon (1995, pp. 16-17) again:

> These methods are what make rules observable and capable of being described. The practical activities of members, engaged in their concrete activities, reveal the rules and the processes that can be studied. In other

words, the careful observation and analysis of the processes used in the members` actions will uncover the processes by which the actors constantly interpret social reality and invent life in a permanent tinkering. Therefore, it is crucial to observe how, in a common-sense manner, actors produce and treat information in their exchanges and how they use language as a resource; in short, how they build up a `reasonable` world to be able to live in it.

Notwithstanding the rather grandiose claim that ethnomethology seeks to analyse production procedures with make any experience of reality possible (Czyzewski, 1989), two constructs central to the project will serve as a flavour of the enterprise: reflexivity and intersubjectivity. It is no accident that reflexivity has become a feature of critical psychology (Condor, 1997) and intersubjectvity an important topic within discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997) an area of the discipline which has paid tribute to the influence of ethnomethodology in the development of its theoretical perspective (Edwards and Potter, 1993).

Beginning with the idea of reflexivity, essentially the reflexivity of conversation analysis is formed through the methodological injunction that all phenomena are to be understood interdependently with the explanation of the phenomena themselves. As Reason (1998, p. 1) notes,

> The reflexivity of CA aspires to being a *Critical* reflexivity, in which the processes of the production of the *possibility* of the existence of phenomena are to be understood (and theorised) integrally with the explanation of the phenomena themselves. There is no disjunction between theory and methodology, but a crucial continuity.

In ethnomethodology, the suggestion is not that people themselves are hyper-self reflexive and constantly thinking about what they are doing and saying. Rather, as Garfinkely noted, when engaged in everyday activities people are not concerned (generally) with discussing practical actions in a self-reflexive fashion:

> They recognize, demonstrate, and make observable for each other the

rational character of their actual, and that means their occasional, practices while respecting that reflexivity as an unalterable and unavoidable condition of their inquiries. (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 8)

To paraphrase Coulon (1995), reflexivity refers to the practices that describe and at the same time constitute a social framework. Engaged in the business of everyday talk, as soon as we describe aspects of our social world, those very descriptions become part and parcel of that world. For ethnomethodology, reflexivity is that essential feature of social action that presupposes the conditions of it`s production, and at the same time makes (acts) observable as actions of a recognisable sort. The meaning of reflexivity here is akin to presupposition, i.e., the idea that any communicative act recognised as intentional will rest upon those presuppositions said to constitute `shared social knowledge`. In talk and interaction presupposed intersubjective knowledge is the practical, social knowledge that competent speakers can be said to hold, `implicit knowledge, tacitly held by members of a culture - implied in the things that people say and do.` (Ramsden, 1998, p. 48).

Conversation analysis highlights the implicit reflexivity of everyday talk, for example highlighting how participants display an orientation to the normative character of conversational structure in their noticing of `deviant cases` during talk (what`s implied in ignoring a question, changing topic suddenly, staying silent for an unexpectedly long pause and so on). Whatever else reflexivity might be, it is part and parcel of dynamic action, locally produced in context and encompassing activities from the banal to the sophisticated. Potter (1996) emphasises this conception of reflexivity in ethnomethodology, noting that descriptions and explanations are not just `about` something, they are always also `doing` something, and one cannot consider people`s explanations outside of the localised context within which what constitutes an `explanation` is worked up by participants during the talk-in-interaction.

A related idea is the notion of intersubjectivity. The significance of an `architecture of inter-subjectivity` in interaction rests on the premise that it is impossible to really know anybody else`s intentions, thoughts or feeling. Ethnomethodology generally takes that view that although we cannot access another persons private thoughts

and experience, nevertheless we can obtain an `intersubjective` shared world as an everyday practical accomplishment. The idea is that people recognise they do not have identical experiences, however for all intents and purposes agree to act as if they do. We can trace this notion directly to Schultz (1962, p. 53) who argued:

> From the outset, we, the actors on the social scene, experience the world we live in as a world both of nature and of culture, not as private but as an intersubjective one, that is, as a world common to all of us, either actually given or potentially accessible to everyone; and this involves intercommunication and language.

Leaving aside the potentially problematic differentiation between `private` and `social` within this idea, intersubjectivity as a theoretical construct has gained prominence in recent years, particularly within educational and developmental psychology (Reddy, 1994; Lerman, 1996). The notion of the self or identity has come under critical scrutiny within and beyond critical psychology (Giddens, 1991; Kerby, 1991; Ricoeur, 1992) and the very notion of the `subject` presupposed by the idea of `intersubjectivity` is now a central theme of post-structuralist critical debate. A growing body of conversation analytic work on the nature of the identity and positioned `subjecthood` in context calls attention to the role of identities in talk, calling into question self-categorisation theories found in social psychology, and noting that people have little difficulty displaying quite contradictory versions of their identities in context (e.g., Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Widdicombe and Woofit, 1995; Edwards, 1998). For now, from an ethnomethodological perspective the conditions under which criteria for presupposing the existence of, and orientation to whatever it is we want to call `intersubjectivity` will be manifested by participants in context. Intersubjectivity is a dynamic contextual phenomena and not a mental state construct held by individuals.

Before turning more directly to CA it is as well to keep in mind that while being ethnomethodologically inspired, CA is considerably more focused on the micro-detail of talk-in-interaction. Reviewing the background framework of CA, Potter (1996) makes the point that the documentary method of interpretation central to ethnomethodology while informing the development of CA, tends towards a more

general analytic focus (e.g., Pollner, 1987). Essentially the documentary method of interpretation highlights the fact that when people attempt to understand ongoing events and actions, they do so in light of background expectations and presuppositions brought to that particular context. At the same time however, specific instances in context inform these background expectations and there is thus a kind of cyclical, circular relation between specific instances and general patterns,

> Garfinkel`s point is that there is no way out of this cycle. It is what all of us make do with in our everyday lives. The only access to the underlying patterns is through instances and the only way of understanding instances is in terms of the patterns to which they belong (Potter, 1996, p. 49).

Since the publication of Sack, Schegloff and Jefferson`s (1974) influential paper on turn-taking in conversation, numerous studies have focused on highlighting how people manage to conduct their everyday interactions in orderly ways. The very production of `talk` as talk, is shown to be a highly sophisticated practical accomplishment where people engage in reflexive procedures, so as to produce the very possibilities for `intersubjective meanings` (in whatever ways they are constituted within local contexts), and displaying the process of ongoing accountability in dynamic and participant-oriented ways (Heritage, 1988; Goodwin, 1984; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Schenkein, 1978). In a now classic paper on the nature of closings in conversation, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) describe how people manage to produce the possibility of ending a conversation, a not insignificant problem given the endemically turn-taking nature of talk. Closings are highly structural events describable as an interactional system which is both sensitive to the needs of the participants and where the sequential ordering of adjacency pairs (Okay?, Yes, Bye, Bye!) is something that participants themselves orient to. As Psathas (1995) notes the study of such phenomena as greetings, questions/answers and closings achieved considerable significance in the study of talk because these represented the first discoveries of orderly interactional phenomena whose methical procedures, rules or sequential structures could be analysed and formalised. The core elements of CA are described by Pomerantz (1990) as being a characterisation of actions, the proposals of methods (members own methods for the production of talk) and the identification of sequential and

interactional features of the ongoing conversation.

Essentially, conversation analysis aims to show how meanings and representations in discourse are produced through the structures, procedures and practices of talk. Lynch and Boden (1994) note that as a research enterprise conversation analysts have been principally concerned with classifying and describing the structures and general procedures employed by people in understanding and taking part in conversations (Psathas, 1996). These include turn-taking, closing conversations, introducing topics, asking questions, making requests and other related features of talk (see Hutchby and Woofit, 1998 for an introduction).

From the outset, Sacks (1992) conceived of the enterprise as a scientific method employing inductive and comparative procedures (Levinson, 1983; Heritage, 1984; Lynch and Boden, 1994), and the practice of treating conversational structure as `basic` and then comparing such structural elements with other form of `institutional talk` has formed the basis for work influential beyond this sub-discipline of sociology CA (Zimmerman and West, 1974; Molotch and Boden, 1985). There is now a substantial body of conversation analytic work in psychology, particularly social psychology (Antaki, et al, 1996; Coupland and Coupland, 1994; Widdicombe and Woofit, 1990), feminist psychology (Stokoe, 1998; Frith and Kitzinger, 1998, Kitzinger and Frith, (in press), but also in areas such as HCI (Luff et al, 1990; Forrester, 1991), educational and developmental psychology (Heyman, 1986; Tarplee, 1996). In each case these studies have called into question traditionally held views and assumptions underpinning taken for granted perspectives, and in that sense contribute towards the development of critical psychology.

The question of what constitutes the object of enquiry in conversation analysis has become a debatable issue in recent writings on the topic (Schlegoff, 1997), and outlining the significance of this for critical psychology requires some additional background. At the risk of oversimplification the study of discourse within and beyond the social sciences falls into two broad orientations. On the one hand we have perspectives and approaches which are essentially post-structuralist and inspired or formulated from the writings of Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger, Habermas, Barthes and the Frankfurt school of critical theory. This critical discourse orientation

places centre stage the significance of ideological, political and cultural critique in the study of language (whether text or talk). For the most part in such approaches discursive analysis is aimed at a general, rather than specific or everyday level and it is clear that many critical psychologists extend and build upon these theoretical positions in their analysis and critique of academic and professional psychology (see Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997).

On the other hand, and in particular within discursive social psychology, discourse and conversation analysts focus on the localised production of meaning realised through talk-in-interaction. Discursive psychology, while informed by Foucauldian theory, has emphasised the nature of talk as action and focuses, for example, on the nature of how discourse makes available interpretative repertoires, the construction of discursive representations by people during their everyday descriptions and explanations (Potter and Wetherall, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1993). While there remains a close concern with ideological and political theorising with regard to data within discursive psychology (Wetherall and Potter, 1992), in contrast within conversation analysis the ethnomethodological insistence that interpretation, theorising or critique can only be formulated with regard to what participant`s actually display within conversation is seen by some critical psychologists as a restrictive attempt at analytic closure (Wetherall, 1998).

The nature of the recording, transcribing and reporting of conversational phenemenon is what is central to this debate. Schegloff (1997) adopting a somewhat strict interpretation of the ethnomethodolgical project insists that before any ideological, political or theoretical gloss can be superimposed on any conversational event, a technically pure analysis of the talk itself must take place. And this technical analysis insists that only if the people involved in the talk demonstrably display orientations to whatever feature, category, theory, or interpretation of interest to the analyst is there in the data, are there grounds for making whatever claims are forthcoming. In reply, Wetherall (1998) points out that this interpretation of participant orientation is much too narrow and if anything, when the conversation analyst selects this (and not that) fragment of talk, he/she is claiming that it is *this* particular fragment which defines what the participants` orientations are.

Certainly, the relationship between the ethnomethodological focus on participant membership and (CA) analyst is to some extent ignored in the literature. The very process of recording, transcribing, and reporting any conversation is itself a descriptive and thus a theoretical act (even if only implicitly). Since the early work of Ochs (1977) social theorists have pointed out that to transcribe is to theorise and to make the claim that it is possible to `capture` a technically pure rendering of talk-in-interaction before proceeding with theoretical or scholarly analysis is better understood with respect to the difficulties ethnomethodology has had establishing itself in mainstream quantitative sociology. In a recent study looking at the relationship between young men`s conception of sexuality and their accounts and explanations of sexual behaviour, Wetherall (1998) highlights the fact that particular examples of participant membership orientations (i.e., the implicit model of moral behaviour ascribed to women and men) can only be understood with reference to broader ideological and cultural beliefs regarding gender relations. If analysts wish to account for the occurrence of a particular utterance (why that now?), a realisable and potentially defensible explanation cannot ignore the background material presuppositions which inform ordinary people`s everyday interactions.

Having said that, it remains the case that the critical scepticism implicit in the `participant orientation` stricture provides a good foundation or buttress against the excesses of linguistic formalism, categorical imposition and the associated methodological procedures commonly found in psycholinguistics and the social psychology of language. Recently, Stokoe (1998) employed CA in a study of gender relations and noted that contrary to the somewhat generalist literature on gender, language and power in talk (see James and Drakich, (1993) for a review), people themselves utilise gender categories in their discussions with one another, and do so in ways that can be highly contradictory, ambiguous and changeable (even during one stretch of talk). Stokoe (1998) points out that only through using CA was it possible to understand the inherent tensions and variability in participant membership categorisations.

Like other literature emerging in this field (e.g., Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998), Stokoe (1998) focuses on one aspect of CA known as membership categorisation

where attention is drawn to the fact that participants employ membership categorisation devices in pursuit of their local aims during talk. Hester and Eglin (1997) describe the focus of membership categorisation analysis as centred on the locally used, invoked and organised, presumed common-sense knowledge of social structures which members of society are oriented to in accomplishing naturally occurring ordinary activities. In other words, if during a conversation with someone I refer to him/her as a `caring friend` then to do so invokes many features, characterisations and presuppositions regarding what it is to be a friend, someone who cares and whatever else comes along with using such a category or label during an actual conversation. Within discursive psychology there has been a growing interest in the production, recognition and manipulation of membership categorisation devices by people during conversation (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). The argument is that whenever we are engaged in talk we routinely, spontaneously and unselfconsciously use `membership categorisation` devices (MCD`s) to organise our conceptions of what we see or hear. Part and parcel of the very act of `sense making` during interaction is achieved through employing such `devices` and attending to their production as potentially noticeable phenomenon. As an example, in her analysis of one small turn during a parent-teacher interview, Baker (1997) highlights that the way in which membership categorisation (e.g., as parent, teacher, children or whatever) is immediately presupposed and oriented to by participants, through the simple act of using a phrase at a specific point in time during the talk. Through employing membership categorisation devices we convey a significant amount of cultural knowledge and mark out relevant discursive objects for recognition and co-oreintation by participants.

Essentially, the analytic task is to highlight how participants make use of the resources of membership categorisation (e.g., categories of being a parent, boss, child, professional or whatever). Summarising the identification of MCD`s as a qualitative methodological procedure, Baker (1997) notes the first step is to locate the central categories (of people, or places, or things) that underpin the talk, including any standard relational pairs such as parents-teacher. Categories can either be marked out explicitly or implied through actions and responses within the talk. Following this, the analyst works through the activities associated with each of

the categories in order to fill out the attributions that are made to each of the categories. `The attributions that are hinted at are as important as any stated in so many words: hinted-at categories or activities or connections between them indicate the subtlety and delicacy of much implicit membership categorisation work` (Baker, 1997, p. 143). Finally the third step is to look at the categories and the attribution associations that members produce (connections between `cultural particulars`) and the social actions that are implied i.e., descriptions of how categories of actors do, could or should behave. When participants `do describing`, they construct a social world in which their categories have a central place. Using a dramaturgical metaphor Baker (1997) views MCD`s as participants` puppets, which they can dress up in, and make behave in various ways (i.e., as category-associated activities).

What is significant is that demonstrating that talk is an accomplished activity produced by participants who exhibit a sophisticated orientation to the processes and mechanisms involved provides a grounded perspective for researchers interested in social interaction. As a micro-sociological context, the study of conversation is increasingly been adopted as a key method for understanding the relationship between the individual and the social (Wootton, 1997; Blum-Kulka and Snow, 1992; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). The methodology itself is conceived as being somehow uncontaminated and a-theoretical, or at least less influenced by the analysts pre-theoretical assumptions (Levinson, 1983; Schegoff, 1997), notwithstanding the reservations we have noted above, summarised cogently by Wetherall (1998).

Could CA have implications for psychology?

The consequences of using CA within psychology may be significant. Employing CA with clinically related areas has facilitated critical debate, for example on the `Quality of Life construct` (Antaki and Rapley, 1996), on communication with people with learning disabilities (Collins, Markova and Murphy, 1997) and on beliefs about developmental disorder (Wootton, 1997; Klippi, 1997). Part of the agenda for critical psychology is to critique theories, methods and professional practice in psychology from perspectives outside the discipline and surely one

important perspective derives from people who actually participate in psychological studies. Arguably, the most significant methodological implication of CA for critical psychology is the requirement that the analyst focuses first and foremost on participants` own methods of production (of social reality) engendering a respect for the everyday and ordinary practical accomplishment of talk-in-interaction. This requires a re-orientation for psychology away from the `grand-narratives` of universality and onto people`s localised understanding of institutional `forms of life` (in the broadest sense). It may also opens up the possibility of an `equity of analytic focus` in research practice, although it is clear there are numerous institutional and professional barriers to be overcome before psychologists adopt a form of analysis which places centre stage participant`s own formulations as the focus of analytic practice.

For the present, we can find recent examples of CA in educational settings including Heyman (1986), who examined the nature of topic formulation in science teaching, noting that the sequential ordering of utterances had a bearing upon what became `hearably problematic` for members of the classroom. Similarly, in a study of classroom writing, Greenleaf and Freedman (1993) employed CA to examine the relationship between learning and problem-solving, arguing that examining an evolving conversation in detail provided critical evidence for the intellectual structuring of the classroom interaction. Within feminist psychology we find examples where CA has been employed in the study of date-rape, highlighting the ways in which exchange sequences can be oriented in particular ways to indicate refusals. Kitzinger and Frith (in press) for example point out that the close study of conversation indicates that women exhibit a sophisticated awareness of the culturally normative ways of `saying no`, and the policy of designing skills training packages to as to make refusals during talk literal and formulaic is counterproductive. While recognising that critical discourse analysis is viewed as a more likely method for advancing political ideals, they suggest that knowledge of the detail of talk-in-interaction can help formulate political arguments and practical programs.

Adopting a conversation analytic perspective also has particular implications for developmental psychology, as Burman (1994) has intimated. Most, if not all,

societies expend considerable effort on explicitly conceptualising, classifying and explaining development (Morss, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1983; Martini, 1995). The process by which development is thought to occur is revealed through narratives describing the life course, including conceptions about human behaviour (particularly those behaviours which can and cannot be changed). Certainly, within our culture, the emphasis is upon individuated development and personhood as an internalised accomplishment. And the context within which we learn to `develop` our children is the conversational context. Using conversation analysis in the study of language acquisition, could for example have considerable implications for how we view what exactly is being acquired. Harris (1983) has commented that it was the invention of writing that made speech speech, and language language. In other words the very idea we have of language is predicated on a particular abstraction (lexicon-syntax-semantic-pragmatics) itself derived from the structuralist analysis of written text: language is a formal object. In contrast, where one adopts a research focus centred on participant-oriented criteria then children do not acquire `language` but rather have to learn under what conditions they can make one (rather than another) sound, where that sound will be recognised and treated as an accountable/intentional act.

Conversation structures are dynamic, immediate, unfolding, projectable and predictable which points to the significance (and difficulty) of learning how to participate in talk with others. Children as young as 18 months show a clear orientation to the sequential nature of conversation (Tarplee, 1996), and where attempts at projected structural forms are misunderstood, this can often lead to considerable difficulty (see Wootton, 1994; 1997; on the `terrible two`s`). Furthermore, as Wootton (1997) argues, sequential understandings create the basis for the child to entertain expectations about how interaction should unfold. He suggests that the earliest expressions of attributable outrage (in the child`s second year),

> represent the most extreme expression of the child`s moral sensibility at this time....There seems little doubt that it is the infringement of sequential expectations which occasions this distinctive outrage. If this is so then this suggests that, for children of this age, their moral sensibility is not so much

an outcome of absorbing a parentally superimposed set of moral concerns as it is of operating with expectations which take their warrant from recent events within the interaction. (Wootton, 1997, p. 199)

Focusing on sequential understandings interdependently expressed as part of the ongoing dynamic context would undoubtedly mitigate against the excessive cognitivism of developmental psycholinguistics. Understandings become social practical accomplishments and always related to public accountability. Overall, there are grounds for arguing that employing conversation analytic methods provides the basis for encouraging critical reflexivity, yet at the same time can be seen as extending familiar qualitative methodological practices found in psychology.

A post-structuralist CA for critical psychology?

As significant aspect of critical psychology has been the critique of contemporary approaches to language within psychology, what Spears (1997) and others refer to as the `turn to language`. The more traditional modernist view considers language as a formal object, a system of signifying relations which exists as a pre-determined formal structure, functioning as a communicative tool (and a largely unproblematic neutral entity amenable to analysis). For the most part, the study of language in psychology rests upon this orientation, and from Chomsky (1957) to Pinker (1996) innateness remains the core explanatory construct underpinning cognitivist-linguistic, and computational, structuralism. In contrast, as we noted earlier, critical and discursive accounts of language focus on language as both system and as social semiotic practice (Fairclough, 1992; Hodge and Kreuss, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), reflected in terms such as discourse, discursive practice, speech genre, register and so on. Language segments the world according to culture and context (Lee, 1992), yet in doing so produces versions of that very reality, ideological interpretations potentially repressive, contestable and always deeply insidious (Foucault, 1972). Viewed in this way, language cannot be a neutral context-free entity: as social practice and productive semiosis, whether talk or text, language interpenetrates all forms of analysis, folk-hermeneutic and formal-analytic. One danger of conversation analysis as methodological practice is that the formalistic tendencies of psychology will lead to an overemphasis on structure and

work against theorisation informed by ideological and critical concerns.

This can be avoided if CA moves beyond focusing solely on those elements of conversation which focus on the sophistication of participants` methods, and critically engage more directly with the problematic agenda of post-structuralist thought. Wetherall (1998) advocates such an approach, arguing that it is possible to utilise the ethnomethodological focus of CA, yet integrate analysis with ideas sympathetic to the post-structural project (e.g., the work of Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). Consider for example how a CA perspective might inform critical debate regarding the status of individuation, personhood and subject positioning. Howard (1985, p. 415) reminds us that what distinguishes Western folk psychology is the extent to which our notions of an inner self are elaborated and made central:

> For us the `real` self is conceived as that inner core of thought and emotion that is only partially displayed in behavior. It is not that our complete sense of personhood excludes interpersonal relationships, just that they are further removed from this central core.

For critical psychology the question arises whether subject positionings are forced upon us or whether the open-ended dynamic nature of talk always makes available as yet unrealized but possible `versions of the self` (Antaki, Condor and Levine, 1996). In light of contemporary critical thought, we can look to Foucault (1988) and his proposal that the subject constitutes him/herself in an active fashion through a set of practices, which the individual does not invent for himself. He suggests that these are patterns the individual simply finds in his environment, "proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group", (Foucault, 1988, p. 11). However, McNay (1994) has pointed out that while Foucault`s (1988) discursive analysis of subject positioning was insightful, it nonetheless couldn`t solve the problem of how the theorized subject positionings operate in practice:

> Archaeological analysis….[Foucault`s method] offers no explanation of the social context in which these positions are embedded and which govern how they are filled.......there appears to be an antinomy between the theorized

notion of the enunciative position in discourse and the untheorized concept of the individual who fills these positions in a seemingly straightforward manner. (McNay, 1994, pp. *77-78*).

It is clear that the pragmatics of how subject positionings are co-constructed dynamically in context could be highlighted through employing conversation analysis, but only through an analysis which does not extrude the content of people`s discursive representations, as Wooffitt and Clark (1998) and Widdicombe (1998) has indicated. The work of Antaki et al (1996) has highlighted the fact that participants have little difficulty in maintaining contradictory self-identity positions in ways that Foucault indicates. Such work also shows that CA, as a reflexive methodology, can inform questions germane to post-structuralist critique and debate.

Critical questions for CA

While it is possible to identify reasons why CA may be an appropriate methodology for critical psychology, we need to be aware of potential limitations. Consider first the seductive nature of CA as an empiricial scientific practice. For Sacks (1992), the very existence of primitive natural science demonstrates that methods can be described in ordinary language in such a way that others can reproduce those methods. (See Lynch and Boden (1994) for a detailed critique of Sacks` conception of natural science.) An important aspect of such methods accounts is that they are internal to the community of practitioners who compose and use them. In other words, descriptions of members` competences are presented as intelligible instructions for other members. Lynch and Boden (1994, p. 90) note:

> By distinguishing the analytic competence of members of the conversation analytic community from the vernacular competence of the ordinary conversationalists described, conversation analysts have segregated their technical reports from the communal practices they describe. The adequacy of such accounts no longer depends upon their effective use as instructions for reproducing the practices described; instead, judgements about empirical adequacy are reserved for other members of the analytic culture, thereby

entitling them, and them alone, to decide on non-intuitive (or specialised-intuitive) grounds how well any technical report represents the collection of data it describes.

Like many other professional discipline the claims conversation analysis make about methodological adequacy are interdependent with the locally formulated practices, skills and competencies with constitute the nature of analytic study. In an effort to `be scientific` professional conversation analysts have succeeded in producing an analytic culture that distances them from `merely` intuitive orientations to situated actions. Although conversation analysts take into consideration participants` orientations to those analytic structures that can be excavated from the minutae of conversational fragments, the analytic practices and technical criteria  may no longer reflect the principles of Garfinkel`s (1967) critical ethnomethdology. Conversation analysts are increasingly formulating their analytic assumptions against a backdrop of `texts` (transcripts) from prior contexts, taking their point of departure from a specialized corpus of analytic models and findings. Instead, and following the suggestion outlined by Lynch and Boden (1994) the question for ethnomethodology has not been about `seeing what someone is saying`, but asking `how is that done?`:

> By treating primitive science as a reflexive achievement— as a stable order of intelligibility that is built up from within public displays of social structure— and not as a preliminary precursor to a natural science of human behavior, ethnomethodologists can once again take up natural-philosophical initiatives to investigate how observations, descriptions and replicable methods are produced within scientific and everyday circumstances (Lynch and Boden, 1994, p. 93).

A second limitation concerns methodological practice. We need to cast a critical eye on what constitutes the `data` of conversation analysis. Leaving aside the observation that video recording is a cultural practice which, methodologically speaking, psychology has treated as simply recording `what is there`, the process of transcription remains `text` production. Keeping in mind the observation that the transcripts of CA share an allegiance with the development of genres for indicating

speech in the novel, the question of transcription tends to be viewed simply as a problem of finding an adequate notation to represent what`s been studied. However, there is no notation that will be generally adequate to the task of representation, somehow able to construct the evidential text of CA as self-sufficient `data`. To quote Reason (1998) on this point:

> If *co-text* is that body of (covert or overt) relevance which comes with the text……then the *surtext* is that field of intertextual and extratextual supplementation (including settings, the grain of voices, glances and shuffles) which inform the listener`s (whether participant, transcriber or analyst) `take` on (apprehension of) the speaking. (Reason, 1998, p. 2).

The problem of notation may yet hinder the development of a critically reflexive conversation analysis. As Reason (1998) notes, the analytic fantasy of a `perfect record and ideal notion` remove the business of recording and transcription from their cultural situatedness. This can lead to the suppression of an understanding of them as always already embedded in the social interaction they are employed to represent, `and in their disguised reappearance as methodological (and hermeneutical) problems…. substantive issues are transformed into technical puzzles` (Reason, 1998, p. 6).

Concluding comments

Although one can identify certain limitations of CA for critical psychology there remain significant potential benefits. First, there is little doubt that `doing CA` encourages an understanding of reflexive practice (both in the `localised` and the critically engaging sense), by requiring a critical awareness of participant-oriented methods for `making sense of` everyday activities. Second, the focus on the locally managed sequential production of participant members understandings can highlight how `surtextual` institutional forces bear upon and (re)produce social relations. Third, there are grounds for suspecting that ethnomethodologically inspired CA can be extended and employed in service of a post-structuralist agenda (discursive, anti-developmental, feminist or whatever) as Kitzinger and Frith (in press) have noted. The very practice of doing CA can also facilitate a reconsideration of long-

held assumptions underpinning more traditional research areas in psychology. Finally, using conversation analysis can engender both an appreciation about, and celebration of, the ordinary practical accomplishments which constitute `doing [being] human`. Conversation analysis is a methodology which can contribute to the reflexive foundations of critical psychology.

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