

Weatherall, A. (2016) 'I need to get some details first' Record keeping as a potential barrier to effective complaint-call management. *Mediation Theory and Practice*, 1, 35-57.

Abstract

In this article, I examined audio-recordings of calls to an independent dispute resolution service in which customers complained about their electricity, gas or water providers. Part of the job of the intake-officers, who answer the calls, was to enter relevant information about the caller and the complaint into a computer software system called RESOLVE. Around 120 calls were analysed using conversation analysis. Although there was no fixed order for registering caller and complaint details, intake-officers regularly prioritised registering caller details. Sometimes that meant interrupting callers as they were telling about their problem. On the whole callers who were interrupted co-operated with the intake-officer redirecting the conversation to collect details about themselves. An analysis of a call is presented where the caller did not co-operate. The intake-officer's insistence of registering the caller's details first, proved to be a barrier and no progress towards dispute resolution was made. The findings are used to support a recommendation for flexibility in the order of activities that achieve telephone-mediated dispute resolution. Being flexible is most likely to effectively progress the interaction to accomplish the institution's business in this case. Flexibility may be a general principle for the delivery of an effective dispute resolution service.

“I need to get some details first”: Record keeping as a potential barrier to effective complaint-call management.

Specialised telephone helpline services have existed for a long time but nowadays they are a ubiquitous aspect of society. For example, Firth, Emmison and Baker (2005) estimated there were over fifteen hundred helplines in the United Kingdom alone. There is an emergent body of academic research that contributes to an understanding of how seeking and providing help for a variety of matters is done over the phone (Baker, Emmison & Firth, 2005; Edwards, 2007). Some aspects of telephone helpline service delivery is generic. For example, there are callers and call-takers who talk to one-another. The caller is seeking help of some kind and the call-taker's role is to provide it. Other features are more specific to the particular service offered. A diverse range of helplines have been studied including those offering emergency assistance (Zimmerman, 1992), counselling (Butler, Danby & Emmison, 2015), technical support (Baker, Emmison & Firth, 2005) and mediation (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Stokoe, 2015). The focus of the present study is a helpline that mediates between customers and utility providers (i.e. electricity, water and gas companies) to resolve disputes.

An important matter for organisations who offer telephone-mediated services is how best to manage calls, especially when some kind of difficulty arises in dealing with a caller. That issue is investigated in the present study using conversation analysis – a methodology that examines recordings and transcriptions of interaction *in situ*. Conversation analysis is a powerful and rigorous approach for answering questions about how actions are accomplished through talk (Levenson, 2013). One well-established finding is that the design of turns of talk, as well as their location in sequences of talk, are central to the production and comprehension of action. For instance, a negative observation made by a speaker (e.g. *he didn't record it*) can be understood by a recipient as a complaint because it specifies something that didn't happen which implies that it should have occurred (Schegloff, 2005). Complaints in mundane talk have a sequential organisation where they regularly emerge through a progression of turns where the recipient of the complaint is the one who ultimately makes explicit the negative assessment (Drew & Walker, 2008).

The ways people tell others about their troubles in mundane talk also has a sequential organisation. Jefferson (1988) established that speakers' elucidations of problems were routinely followed by affiliation responses. While affiliation is a relevant response to a speaker who is telling about their trouble in mundane talk, it can be restricted activity in an institutional context where service providers are required to be independent. In the same kind of institutional context as is examined in the present study, Weatherall (2015) documented a variety of linguistic practices that were used by conciliators to maintain a neutral stance towards client's problems. For example, conciliators may repeat client's description of the relevant problem, editing out emotionally laden terms (also see Weatherall & Stubbe, 2014).

As well as contributing to knowledge of the ways social interaction is orderly and actions are accomplished, conversation analysis has informed the development of a communication skills training approach called the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM; Stokoe, 2014). In CARM training, anonymised recordings of actual service encounters are presented in real-time, with specialised transcripts, to trainee service providers. The CARM approach involves the discussion and evaluation of actual interactions as they unfold turn-of-talk by turn-of-talk. Recordings of actual interactions and the analysis of them provide the strongest evidence base for organisations to develop policies about communication and practices. For example, Stokoe (2013) conducted a conversation analytic study of intake calls to a community mediation service for disputing neighbours. She found that clear descriptions of the mediation process and expressions of affiliation by call-takers were central to getting the caller to consent to mediation proper.

The present study examined recordings and transcripts of complaint calls to a telephone-mediated dispute resolution service. The findings are used to support a recommendation for policy that promotes flexibility in the way call-takers handle complaint calls.

Progressing the project of institutional interaction

Taking a conversation analytic perspective, Heritage and Maynard (2006) suggested that institutional interactions have an overall structural organisation that can be empirically established. The structure is built from the different activities that accomplish the particular institutional business. Openings and closings are distinctive aspects in the organisation of overall structure in both ordinary and institutional interactions (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Additionally, institutional interactions such as calls for emergency assistance (Zimmerman, 1992) and acute care doctor-patient interactions (Robinson, 2003) have been found to have a clearly identifiable internal structure.

From his research on doctor-patient communication, Robinson (2003) importantly established that the structure of activities in an institutional interpersonal encounter was a *project of interaction*. A project is made up of a series of activities that together form a coherent package for accomplishing the business of the institution. For the medical visits Robinson studied, those activities included establishing a new medical problem as the reason for the encounter, gathering additional information (history taking and/or physical examination), diagnoses delivery and treatment recommendation. Robinson noted that the activities were normatively ordered but the structure was dynamic – not all activities occurred in every interaction and any particular activity could be revisited multiple times during the interaction. An initial step in the present research was to document the relevant activities that cohered into a project of interaction for the calls the dispute resolution service. From there we observed that one of the activities – registering details in the official record – could interrupt the smooth progression of the interaction. The activity of registering details then became the focus of the analysis. We asked how registering details was done and where the accomplishment of that activity could go awry.

The institutional context

The organisation whose calls were recorded for this study is a non-governmental, not-for-profit body. Their dispute services are free to consumers. The organisation is funded by utility companies who are required by law to provide independent as well as in-house means for dealing with customer complaints. The dispute resolution services offered are described and promoted as ‘independent’ because the organisations’ work is neither consumer advocacy nor for the direct benefit of the utility companies.

The institution aims to differentiate itself from the utility providers’ call centres which are criticised by consumers as being impersonal and rather unhelpful. Some ways in which the dispute resolution service practices a more personal approach is that call-takers provide their first name in call openings and the same call-taker will typically follow a case through the dispute resolution process.

The call-takers – called ‘in-take officers’ - are required to log each call into a computer software system called RESOLVE. In-take officers typically entered information provided by the caller as they were on the phone to them. RESOLVE has required fields that must be completed before a case can be saved for the official record. The required fields include caller details, mandatory complaint information (including, name of the company involved, utility type and amount of caller contact with the organisation), complaint particulars and the resolution option the caller chooses. In an observational study of the in-take officers as they took calls Dewar (2011) found variability in how data entry into RESOLVE was done. Some intake-officers entered the information as it was serendipitously provided from the caller, navigating to the relevant field in the system and filling it in while taking primarily listening role. Other intake-officers were more influenced by the order of fields in RESOLVE – proactively asking callers for information using the order they appeared in RESOLVE. Thus RESOLVE could shape the interaction between the

intake-officer and the caller but did not dictate it. Dewar's observations are confirmed by the analysis below that shows there was no necessary order for registering caller details but intake-officers regularly prioritised it as a first activity.

Data

The data set for this study comprised of 120 calls made by members of the public to an Australian helpline that offers an independent dispute resolution service to consumers for complaints about their utility providers (electricity, gas and/or water). Institutional permission and ethical approval was given to use the calls for academic research. In the transcripts names have been pseudonymised and identifying information has been changed.

Accomplishing independent dispute resolution

The overall structure of the calls that accomplished independent dispute resolution became evident from the process of listening and transcribing the data. The project of the interaction or the institutional project was identified as involving a series of activities that can successfully accomplish telephone-mediated dispute resolution for the target institution. Those activities were:

1. Opening
2. Reason for the Call
3. Taking Details for the Record
4. Diagnostic Questioning
5. Explanation of Service and Process
6. Establishing Resolution Option
7. Closing

A characteristic of the overall structure of the calls was its dynamism. Not all the activities occurred in every call – for example, if it was clear the wrong service had been contacted intake-officers moved directly into call closing. Also, the order could vary – for example the Explanation of Service and Process may be delivered earlier or later in the call. A focus of the analysis presented below is the activity of taking details for the record. While taking details for the record can occur at any time we found that intake-officers regularly give priority to that activity over, for example, listening to the reason for the call. Caller's typically cooperated with the prioritisation of taking details for the record.

Analysis

The analysis provides evidence to support our recommendation that flexibility in how a call progresses is important for effective service delivery. Two distinct activities were routinely part of the dispute resolution process that we observed - establishing a relevant problem and registering details in the official record. We begin by showing there is no necessary order for doing those two activities. In some calls registering details was done first, in others it wasn't. We found intake-officers regularly gave precedence to official record keeping. On the whole that worked well, however, sometimes the activity of registering details stalled the smooth progression of the call. The risks of being inflexible is shown by presenting a worse-case call. An intake-officer's insistence on getting an address before establishing the relevancies of the problem resulted in the call ending before any progress towards dispute resolution was made.

Registering details first

It can be the intake-officer or the caller who raise the relevance of the official record first. The extract below shows a standard way intake-officers began calls. The opening typically included a greeting, an institutional identification and a personal identification using a first name.

The caller, after returning the greeting and giving their own first name, oriented to the relevance of the official record by offering to provide her reference numbers:

Extract 1

01 INT: Good afternoon welcome to the office of the energy
02 and water ombudsman=you're speaking with nicole
03->CAL: oh hello nicole my names diane **would you like me**
04-> **to give you my reference numbers**
05 INT: yeah sure go ahead

The caller's offer to provide her reference numbers was accepted by the intake-officer, who shows she is ready to receive them by saying *go ahead*. Having a reference number tells the intake-officer it is a repeat call and the caller's details and other possibly relevant information will already be registered on the record. The offer of the reference numbers also shows the caller knows that a relevant initial activity is calling up her details from the official record.

If a reference number is not offered and if the caller gives no indication they have called before, then an intake-officer may ask about previous contact at the first opportunity. If there is none, as is the case in the extract below, then the intake office can proceed with getting the caller's details.

Extract 2

01 INT: Good afternoon office of the energy and water
02 ombudsman this is Nina speaking
03 CAL: .hh uhm (.) >good afternoon< I wish to complain:
04 about EGL, the've uhm (1.2) been (0.4) >you know< they
05 haven't billed me for ah twenty months=now they hit
06 me with a bill so it goes back and they want
07 ah immediate payment.
08->INT: **okay have you contacted our office before**
09 (0.6)
10 CAL: no
11 (0.6)
12->INT: **alright so >I just< need to get some**
13 **details first=**
14 CAL: =yep
15 INT: h- is the account in your name

The intake-officer begins their response to the caller's first problem presentation with *okay* (line 08). The term 'okay' has multiple discourse functions (Gaines, 2011). In response to information it simply receipts without showing any particular stance towards the information, for example, as surprising or troubling. After receipting the information intake-officer's the turn proceeds by asking if the caller has contacted the office before. The question has the form of a yes/no interrogative (Raymond, 1993) and is designed for a 'yes' answer. After a short silence a negative response is given.

The relevance of the question about previous contact with the service and the negative response is that there will be no record of this caller in RESOLVE – the organisation's record keeping system. The upshot for the intake-officer was that she would have to log the caller's details into the system. She articulates that upshot by saying *alright so* before announcing that she needs to get some of the caller's details (lines 12-13). The matter of getting details is construed as a minimal thing that is required *I just need*. Furthermore, it was referred to as an activity that precedes another activity *get some details first*. What will happen after getting the details was not explicit but presumably getting more information about the complaint itself. In the above case, the caller displayed his understanding and willingness for the activity of getting details by answering *yep*.

Then in the next turn the intake office began getting details with a first question *is the account in your name*.

The problem first

The extracts presented above show one trajectory the calls can take whereby accessing or registering details in the official record was done first. Alternatively, the intake-officer could take a listening role and have the caller spontaneously present more information about their problem. The next extract shows a case where the caller continued describing the reason they had contacted the service.

Extract 3

01 INT: Good morning welcome to the energy and water ombudsman
02 this is Molly
03 CAL: Molly my names bob Millaby from Dartford in Victoria
04 INT: yes:
05 CAL: and I've been having a problem with electricity
06 accounts
07 INT: Okay sure:=
08 CAL: =just a simple thing
09 INT: yeah
10 (0.4)
11 CAL: ahh we've got one of these new fangled smart meters
12 INT: hm hm
13 (0.5)
14 CAL: when we receive our account (0.7) it gives
15 us (0.4) previous reading zero (0.7) current
16 reading this case it's eight hundred and four
17 on the peak
18 (1.1)
19 INT: °mm hmm

In the above extract the intake-officer has several turn taking opportunities to launch a question about previous contact (for example, at lines 04, 07, 09, 12 and 19). However, at these places the intake-officer simply receipted the information given or minimally acknowledged it with *hm hm*. It was not for several minutes and about half way into the call that the intake-officer initiated the activity of registering the caller's details (not shown in the above extract). So, calls can and do progress smoothly to effective resolution when registering details occurs later in the interaction. There is no necessary reason for registering details first, although as the next section shows intake-officer's regularly prioritise that activity.

Prioritising registering details

The analysis so far has shown two alternative trajectories the calls can take. Intake-officers can initiate the official business of registering details as soon as they can or they can assume a listening role, allowing the caller to give a full explanation of why they have called. In the former case, where the intake-officer initiates registering details, the smooth progression of the interaction requires the caller aligning or co-operating with that activity. For example, in Extract 2 presented above, the caller showed an immediate willingness to proceed with registering details resulting in a smooth transition from the caller explaining their problem to the activity of getting information for the official record. In the extract below the transition was not so smooth. The intake-officer interrupted the caller's problem presentation in order to initiate record keeping (see lines 17-19). The interruption shows that, in this case, the intake-officer was actually prioritising registering details over the caller's problem presentation.

Extract 4

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

In the above extract the caller was explaining why they called the service by describing their problem. The intake-officer initially assumed a listening role as indicated by their minimal *mhm* responses (line 05 and 11). Before the caller finished their explanation, however, the intake-officer interrupted by saying *okay so* in overlap. The caller stopped talking and the intake-officer continued by asking the caller to slowdown. The reason the intake-officer provided for getting the caller to slow down was so the case could be lodged.

A current speaker has the rights to the conversational floor until the end of their turn (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). If another party makes a bid for the floor it can be construed as an interruption and therefore a complain-able action (Schegloff, 2001). It seems likely that in the above case the intake-officer interrupted the caller when they did so, in order that the relevant details could be entered into the case log as they were being given by the caller. Although seemingly efficient because details could be entered into the record as they are being mentioned, interrupting the caller carries with it a risk of causing offense because it explicitly prioritises the intake-officer's concerns over the caller's problem presentation.

The next extract is also a case where the intake-officer interrupted the caller to launch the activity of registering details. In the case below the interruption occurred before the caller was even finished their first turn of talk.

Extract 5

01 INT: good afternoon office of the energy and water
 02 ombudsmen this is larnie speaking?
 03 CAL: .hhhh hi larnie .hhhh um yeah we've got a problem
 04 with our electricity bill.
 05 INT: [o]
 06 CAL: [a]nnn we'd just like to talk to you abo(h)ut .hhh
 07 INT: **okay have you contacted our office before?**
 08 (0.2)

09 CAL: nope
 10 (0.2)
 11 INT: **hokay I just need to get some details and then you**
 12 CAL: [°cool°]
 13 INT: **[can]tell me about the problem=**
 14 CAL: =°okay°

At the first possible place where the caller could be finished talking (but isn't) the intake-officer attempted to talk but stops (line 05). The caller continued talking and the intake-officer made a second bid, this time successful for the conversational floor. This second bid was not in overlap with the caller but it was still interruptive because the caller was not finished their turn – it was not grammatically complete. As in the previous extract, in this one the caller showed their willingness to cooperate with the activity of registering details by agreeing to it.

The previous two extracts showed that intake-officers can prioritize registering details for the record by interrupting the caller when they are describing their problem. Those interruptions stall the smooth progression of the interaction because what the caller is doing is disrupted. In the above two cases the caller conceded the conversational floor and cooperated with the intake-officer. Nevertheless, and as will be shown below, interruption carries with it risks of causing offense and aggravating the caller.

So far, we have established that there is no necessary order to the activities of problem presentation and registering details. We have also shown that intake-officers can prioritize registering details. One way they accomplish that prioritization is to interrupt the caller who is presenting their reason for calling. In all the cases so far the callers have cooperated with the trajectory of action the intake-officer is progressing. Cooperation, however, does not necessarily occur. The next series of extracts are taken from a single call where the caller does not co-operate and the intake officer insists on the necessity of registering the call. The interaction ends without any progress towards dispute resolution.

Trouble with registering details

The extracts presented below were taken from a single call that was just over 12 minutes long. In that time the intake-officer asked for details over 12 times – half of which are shown in the extracts below. Clearly it is a case where registering the details first was an activity that caused trouble and halted the smooth progress of the call. It is a call that shows what can happen if there is inflexibility about how a call is managed - there was no progress towards dispute resolution.

The first extract presented below is 25 seconds into the call. It shows the caller explaining for the first time their reason for the call. In that explanation she revealed previous contact with the organisation, which prompted the intake-officer to ask for the reference number details in order to retrieve the relevant record.

Extract 6 Trouble with details

17 CAL: I contacted the:: you:
 18 (0.2) l:ast (.) on the twenty seventh. (0.4) .hh::
 19 in regarding my gas bill, (.) >.hh< and I'm
 20 wondering,=and I was to:ld .hh: that they would ring
 21 me back and I'm wondering >they've< they've got my
 22 name >my nah ph<=phone number and my <area co:de> .hh
 23 meaning your firm .hh: um (0.2) and I'm wondering
 24 hhhow long should I wait because hh the: I just
 25 wanted to: get my gas bill organised,
 26 INT: **yip do you have your reference number please?**
 27 CAL: I didn't take a reference number.
 28 INT: o:kay what's your: surname?

29 CAL: Larr:en:

The intake-officer's request for a reference number (line 26) displayed their understanding that all calls to the organisation are registered and have a reference number. A reference number is one way to retrieve a caller's details from the system but a surname or address can also be used. In the above case the caller doesn't have a reference number so the intake-officer asked for the caller's surname (line 28), which is given (line 29). The intake-officer has prioritised getting the registered details, because she asked for a reference number instead of answering or addressing the caller's question *I'm wondering how long should I wait* (lines 23-24).

The extract below shows a few moments later when the call-taker showed their concern about the reference number by asking if it was something that they should have taken. The intake-officer reassured the caller by saying *no that's okay* but continued to pursue the activity of retrieving the record by asking the caller for their address.

Extract 7 Trouble with details

41 CAL: .hh should I have taken a ref- I don't think that was
42 recommended and I forget to a:skç
43 **INT:** no that's okay: **w:hat's your address**
44 **CAL:** .hh **I didn't give my address:** (.) I just gave my
45 phone: numberç
46 INT: .hh:
47 (3.5)
48 INT: o:kay:

The callers' response to the request for her address (line 44) displayed her understanding that the intake-officer was still occupied with retrieving her recorded information. The caller avoided providing the requested information by describing its lack of relevance to what, in her understanding, was the current action. There was a substantive silence of 3.5 seconds (line 47) in which it is likely the intake-officer was trying to retrieve the caller's record. The caller's record could not be retrieved despite getting further information from the caller about the time and reason for the previous contact.

The next extract shows the caller finishing her explanation of what happened in the previous contact with the dispute resolution service by disclosing that she doesn't like utility companies having her phone number. The intake-officer then announced that she will need to take the caller's details. From that announcement, the caller properly inferred that her case wasn't found on the record.

Extract 8 Trouble with details

89 CAL: I don't like (0.3) Utilities having my phone number
90 (0.6)
91 CAL: .hh:: meaning the gas and electricity and all that
92 sort of people .hh
93 **INT:** .hh o::kay well **I'll need to take your details, um**
94 **so that=**
95 **CAL:** **=so you haven't got me on screen.He didn't re:cord it.**
96 (0.4)
97 INT: no:.

The intake-officer's announcement that she will need to take the caller's details (line 93) meant the retrieval search had been unsuccessful and she is shifting to registering the caller's details. The intake-officer's began an explanation for having to take details *so that* (line 94) when the caller interrupted with with a request for confirmation that the call-taker cannot retrieve her case. Negative observations such as *so you haven't got me on screen.He didn't record it* are an

indication of the complainability of something because they imply an absence of something that should have been present (Schegloff, 2001; 2005). So, at this point in the interaction there are now two (potential) problems – the one the caller is calling about and one about the service itself because they do not have a record of her previous call.

From the caller's perspective, a consequence of not having her case in the record is that she has to explain her situation again. The next extract shows the caller beginning to do that and the intake-officer interrupting her.

Extract 9 Trouble with details

103 CAL: well]I'll I'll
104 re-reiterate .hh the [two months]
105 INT: [.hh sorry]Miss Lareen? before
106 we go any further **I do need to take some details from**
107 **you** so we can .hh um get the complaint started is
108 that okay? .hh
109 CAL: well just a minute just a minute .hh what can I-
110 before I go down that track [.hh] What can you do=
111 INT: [°sure°]
112 CAL: =for me

The caller showed her intention to describe her reason for calling by launching a pre-telling sequence (Schegloff, 2007) that indicated what is to be said has been said before – she is reiterating (lines 103-104). However, the intake-officer interrupted by explaining that she needed to take some details before they can *get the complaint started* (line 107). The intake-officer asked for the caller's agreement to do so by saying *is that okay* (line 108). However, the caller does not agree to give her details. Instead, she stalled that activity by saying, *just a minute just a minute* (line 109) and goes on to ask *before I do down that track .hh what can you do for me*.

In extracts x and y above, the first signs of trouble about registering details for the record were when caller avoided giving her address. The above extract showed a different kind of trouble. The caller explicitly challenged the intake-officer's assumption about getting a complaint started. She countered the intake-officer's request about getting details with a question of what the intake-officer could do for her. In response, to the caller's request for clarification about what she can expect from the dispute resolution service, the intake-officer started to give an explanation of service and process, which included a routinized description about of the institution being independent. The extract below shows the caller requesting further clarification about the service offered by asking whose side they take.

Extract 10 Trouble with details

244 CAL: .hh hh: but whose side are you on? are you
245 [on (with me)]
246 INT: [we're independent. so we don't act on your behalf
247 or on the providers behalf .hh:: hh
248 CAL: .hh but I'm really frightened (am one) do you ring
249 them up do you ring the gas people up?
250 INT: we can call them or: I mean jus- aga- again as I said
251 **once we get your details** .hh we ask what you would
252 like to do to resolve the issue,=

The intake officer responded to the caller's question about partiality by explaining that being independent means they don't act on either parties behalf. At lines 248-249 the caller disclosed they are scared about what is going to happen, asking whether the intake officer will call the utility people up. The intake-officer began to respond by confirming that calling the gas company might be something that could happen (line 250). Before completing her response, however, the intake-

officer goes back to the matter of getting the details, which is described as something that has to happen *first once we get your details .hh we ask what you would like to do to resolve the issue*, (lines 251-252).

In the interaction following the above extract, the caller further elaborated about her fear of being identified to the utility companies because of the damage it may do to her reputation. The intake-officer took a listening role and the caller proceeded to provide further details about her problem. Before long, however, the call-taker once again raised the issue of taking the caller's details as a precursor to taking action that might resolve the dispute:

Extract 11 Trouble with details

275 CAL: the next bill comes on the
276 twenty-sixth of October?
277 (0.6)
278 CAL: opening balance ninety-five?
279 (0.4)
280 CAL: well that was the previous one [>so I<]
281 INT: [okay] .hh alright
282 so what I will need to do is take your details and
283 th[en (I'll have somebod-)]
284 CAL: [and what will happen in] that what will happen in
285 that instant,
286 (0.3)
287 INT: hh we can ask them to check (0.2) .hh um or to
288 provide you with an explanation as to why they
289 haven't received .hh um the eighty-five dollar
290 payment?

The above Extract shows the intake officer interrupting the caller again to return to the (alleged) necessity of taking details for the record (lines 282-283). The caller again avoided giving those details by asking for further clarification about possible future courses of action. The intake-officer responded to that inquiry by outlining viable courses of action, which she again makes conditional (not shown above) on getting the caller's details. The next and final extract shows how the call ends. It begins with the intake-officer explicitly recognising the lack of progress in the call and telling the caller again that she needs to get her details.

Extract 12 Trouble with details

369 INT: okay well we are going around in circles **so what I**
370 **need to do is to take those details y:our details.hh**
371 and we can raise the complaint >an< to a senior
372 complaints consultant .hh who will address the matter
373 and resolve the matter, is that okay?
374 (0.2)
375 CAL: .hh:: hh::
376 INT: that's what I [can do for you.]
377 CAL: [Do you suggest I] ring them up again?
378 (0.4)
379 INT: It's up to you what you'd like to do.
380 (1.2)
381 CAL: .hh but why do they go backwards on the previous
382 arrang:ement.=
383 INT: =I CAn't answer that question which is why I said we
384 can ask them for an explanation
385 (0.6)

386 INT: .hh
387 CAL: look [I have to I have] to ring you back=
388 INT: [I am not the provider]
389 CAL: =I can't get anywhere with you lot either, B[:ye.]=
390 INT: [okay]=
391 CAL: =[thanks] for your time
392 INT: =[byebye] thanks bye.

At the beginning of the above extract the intake officer described what has been happening in the call as *going around in circles*. Nevertheless, she goes on and gives a plan of action whereby the complaint will be passed on to a senior consultant. Plans of action, regularly occur late in a call. In response to the proposed plan of action the caller asked whether the intake officer would advise ringing the company again. The intake-officer avoided giving advice to the caller about ringing the company by construing what the caller decides to do as a matter of choice *It's up to you what you'd like to do* (line 379). The intake-officer also does not answer the next question posed by the caller. At that point the caller made a unilateral move to end the call *look I have to I have to ring you back* (line 387). The caller's dissatisfaction with what has transpired is evident in line 389, in the negative formulation *I can't get anywhere with you lot either*.

Discussion

The present study is a small contribution to a broad cross-disciplinary intellectual enterprise to better understand the complex dynamics of social interaction *in situ*. Taking a conversation analytic perspective particular institutions, such as the dispute resolution service examined here, are literally talked into being through the linguistic practices, used and understood, as doing things. Our investigation has resulted in an empirically grounded recommendation about how best to accomplish dispute resolution by phone. We suggest that flexibility around when to do things during the call is important.

The things or activities that accomplish the business of an institution are an interactional project – a flexible structure where a series of activities cohere into an overall course of action. In CARM – an applied form of conversation analysis – the interactional project is a conversational 'racetrack' with various hurdles to clear (Stokoe, 2013). In the situation examined in this paper the activities or hurdles included what we have called a routinized call-opening, the caller providing their reason for the call, intake officers recording personal information and complaint details in the computer system, the intake-officer giving an explanation of the service, establishing agreement about a resolution option and ending the call.

In some of the calls we examined the interactional project was completed efficiently and effectively. In others, however, trouble arose in clearing the hurdles, which stalled the smooth progression of the call. One barrier to effective dispute resolution that we observed was getting personal details for the computer record. Personal details could be entered into the computer system at any stage of the call, however, we found intake-officers regularly interrupted the caller as they were telling about their problem to get personal information. Those interruptions show the intake-officers prioritising the activity of getting details for the record over listening to the caller. On the whole, callers aligned with the new activity initiated by the intake-officer. They responded to the interruption by cooperating with the move to a different activity by answering, for example, the information requests.

There are some good reasons for getting relevant caller details, first. An important one is that if there has been previous contact between the caller and the dispute resolution service, there will be information about it the RESOLVE database. Even if there hasn't been previous contact, getting personal details first makes sense because when a new call-case is being logged the first screen the intake-officer sees asks for caller details. To some extent RESOLVE provides a

normative order of the interaction, at least for the intake-officer, to progress dispute resolution. Information can be entered into RESOLVE in the order that it is seen by the intake-officer.

RESOLVE as a system influences but does not determine the overall course of the calls. It is possible for intake officers to navigate around different screens of RESOLVE so that it is completed flexibly. Some intake-officers maintained a listening role while callers presented extended narratives about their complaints. While not speaking intake-officers would enter relevant information as it was serendipitously disclosed – navigating around RESOLVE as required. An advantage of taking a recipient or listening role early in the call is it allows callers, who may be agitated, to fully air their grievances and feel their side of the dispute has been fully appreciated. Weatherall and Stubbe (2014) suggested a display of empathetic understanding was crucial to successful complaint call completion, even when it was not a legitimate part of the institutional service offered.

Although prioritising getting the callers details has good reason we found insisting on it can derail the interactional project. We identified and analysed a worst-case call where no progress towards dispute resolution was made. We found that progression of the call towards dispute resolution was stalled because an intake-officer would not proceed without the caller's address, which was not forthcoming. In this special case the intake-officer's interruptions were counterproductive and did not advance the relevant business. The caller ended the interaction abruptly and was clearly dissatisfied with the service provided.

The evidence that we provide to support our recommendation for flexibility is from a sample of actual calls where dispute resolution is done. Effective dispute resolution was accomplished when callers were allowed to fully explain their problem. It was also accomplished when intake-officers interrupted callers to shift the activity to getting callers' details. Dispute resolution was not accomplished when the intake-officer made getting the caller's details a requirement of progressing other relevant activities.

Our suggestion that flexibility is an important principle for effective complaint call management is based on the close examination of one institutional context. Future work may usefully establish whether flexibility is a more general principle that supports effective service delivery. Anecdotally inflexibility in call management can be highly irritating– as bad experiences with automated telephone attendants attests. A framework for work-flow may be an effective solution to managing large volumes of calls (or a lack of human resources) efficiently. A risk with such frameworks is when they are too rigid because they can become a barrier to progressing an institutional interaction.

Conversation analytic studies of actual institutional interactions are not only an academic enterprise. Detailed analyses of institutional interactions *in situ* can be applied to changing institutional practices. Stokoe's (2014) Conversation Analytic Role Play Method (CARM) is an exciting development in that direction. CARM workshops are tailored by an analysis of interactions in a particular institutions. It remains to be seen whether there are general communication principles for effective service delivery. If there are some general principles of effective communication in institutional contexts flexibility is likely to be one of them.

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