Brief Guide to Using Conversation Analysis in Counselling Psychology Research

**Why use CA as research method?**

- Participants’ retrospective reports of interactions, e.g. in interviews, may not be optimally informative since some interactions may be difficult to remember and/or articulate (Hepburn et al., 2014). To address this, CA enables us to make an observational study of interactions as they unfold.
- Using CA is more data-driven than other forms of observational research, since any analytic category used must be visibly oriented to by the participants in the interaction.
- CA requires bracketing of counselling and psychotherapeutic theories, which can then help us identify tacit and/or previously unnotated features (Pollinghorne, 1992) of how clients and therapists interact (Madill, 2015).
- This focus on visible features enables systematic identification of interactional practices which recur across different therapists, clients and sessions. Useful for training.

**What is Conversation Analysis (CA)?**

Examines how social actions, like therapy, are accomplished in real-life interactions.

Focuses on observable features of how people interact e.g. how the participants themselves visibly understand and respond to each other’s interactions.

Findings therefore highlight what participants treat as important, instead of an imposition of the analyst’s categories.

Developed by sociologists in the 1960’s, theoretical links with Garfinkel, Schütz and Herndl (Heritage, 1984).

**Recent Applications of CA to Counselling & Therapy**

- Initially appears technical and complicated.
- However, CA transcripts are just attempts to show the visible features of human interaction, which people produce and can respond to.
- For example, features like in-breaths, pauses and repairs or re-starts can be visibly treated as important and consequential by participants for how the interaction progresses.

**CA Transcription**

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**Sample Preliminary Analysis**

Client shows they are finished their turn.

**Therapist offers a formulation of what the client has just said— in therapeutic terms, an empathic reflection.**

Client again shows they are finished their turn, but this time, the therapist withholds from taking a turn. Question for further CA and/or therapeutic exploration: Why does the therapist withhold here?

Client makes their own assessment of the process they have been describing.

Client produces a turn-medial agreement. Question for further CA and/or therapeutic exploration – why is this agreement in the middle of the turn rather than at the start?

**Limitations**

Can be difficult to obtain consent from clients and therapists to record sessions.

Audio-recorded data are more anonymous and easier to obtain, but lack non-verbal features of the interaction.

Can be useful to supplement the CA findings regarding visible features of the interaction with participants’ reports regarding what was significant in the interaction.

Transcription and analytic conventions can initially appear complicated.

**Recommended CA training resources & texts**

- **Accessible introductory textbook**

- **Accessible research paper**

- **Online CA transcription tutorial**
  [http://homepages.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/sitemenu.htm](http://homepages.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/sitemenu.htm)

- **List of CA data sessions to attend**
  [https://raul.net/teaching-2/data-sessions/](https://raul.net/teaching-2/data-sessions/)

**References**