'JUST SAY IT IN YOUR OWN WORDS'

THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONAL NATURE OF INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWS INTO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Kathryn Fogarty
B.A. (Hons)

School of Psychology
The University of Adelaide

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Combined Master of Psychology (Clinical)/Doctor of Philosophy

April 2010

Contents

Abstract iv

Declaration vii

Acknowledgements viii

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1. Finding the research question 1

1.2. Aims of the research 3

1.3. Choosing to study investigative interviews into child sexual abuse 4

1.4. Overview of thesis 5

Chapter 2: Theoretical approach and methodology 8

2.1. Discursive psychology and conversation analysis 8

2.2. Evidential interviewing as a form of institutional talk 11

2.2.1. What makes investigative interviews with children institutional? 12

2.3. Method 16

2.3.1. Data 16

2.3.2. Procedures for accessing, handling and analysing the data 18

2.3. Ethical considerations 22

Chapter 3: Prior work on child investigative interviewing 26

3.1 Introduction 26

3.2. The reliability of children's reports 28

3.2.1. Influences on children's reliability 29

3.2.2. Ways of identifying reliable reports 41

3.2.3. Some limitations of the literature on children's reliability as eyewitnesses 45

3.3. Disclosure 47

3.3.1. Patterns of disclosure: How children disclose sexual abuse 47

3.3.2. Factors promoting disclosure 51

3.4. Research into investigative interviewing practices in the field 52

3.5. An alternative view: Investigative interviewing as social interaction 60

3.6. Prior conversation analytic work examining children's talk in interview and therapeutic contexts 63

Chapter 4: Relevant conversation analytic concepts explained 70

4.1. Introduction 70

4.2. Sequence organisation 70

4.3. Preference organisation 75
4.4. Progressivity 76
4.5. Person reference 79
Chapter 5: Introducing the topic of abuse: Interviewer's and children's methods for producing disclosures 81
5.1. Introduction 81
5.1.1. Guidelines on introducing the topic of abuse in an investigative interview 84
5.2. Analysis 88
5.2.1. Introducing the topic of concern with minimal disturbance to progressivity ..88
5.2.2. Topic initiating sequences with greater disturbance to progressivity 102
5.3. Conclusions and implications 118
Chapter 6: Responding to children's discomfort about disclosing sexual details 122
6.1. Introduction 122
6.2. Analysis 128
6.2.1. Responding to Richard's discomfort 128
6.2.2. Body diagrams as a device to overcome trouble naming sexual body parts and actions 172
6.3. Conclusions and implications 184
Chapter 7: The epistemic work of children's claims to know and remember 187
7.1. Introduction 187
7.2. Analysis 189
7.2.1. Unmarked claims to know or remember 189
7.2.2. Claims to know or remember with accompanying accounts 197
7.2.3. When children don't account, interviewers prompt them 205
7.2.4. Marking claims to know or remember as tentative 217
7.2.5. Disclaiming knowing or remembering with accounts for why 227
7.2.6. Unmarked disclaiming of knowing and remembering 234
7.2.7. "I don't know" with no account 239
7.2.8. When " I don't know" is part of other activities 256
7.3. Conclusions and implications 270
7.3.1. Summary of findings on children's epistemic work *270*
7.3.2. Implications *274*
Chapter 8: Children's Accounts of moral agency 278
8.1. Introduction 278

8.1.1. The psychology of children's morality 279
8.2. Analysis 283
8.2.1. Active resistance: This is what I did to stop it 283
8.2.2. This is why I couldn't stop it 290
8.2.3. It happened but I was not complicit 297
8.2.4. An exception that proves the point? 304
8.3. Conclusions 306
Chapter 9: Conclusions and implications: Investigative interviewing as social interaction 314
9.1. Introduction 314
9.2. Summary of the analytic chapters 314
9.3. Implications for investigative interviewing 319
9.4. Implications for talking with children in clinical settings 325
9.5. Limitations of the study and directions for future research 331
9.6. Concluding remarks 334
References 336
Appendices 348
Appendix 1: Relevant case details for the interviews used as data 349
Appendix 2: A key to Jeffersonian transcription symbols 350
Appendix 3: How to read the body movement transcription 352
Appendix 4: Layout of the interview room for each interview 353
Appendix 5: Potential analytic lines of inquiry generated from the transcription process 359
Appendix 6: Written information sheet provided to families 361
Appendix 7: Consent form for families 364
Appendix 8: Independent complaints procedure 366
Appendix 9: Examples of body diagrams 367

Abstract

Although there is now a significant body of psychological literature examining the investigative interviewing of children, this research neglects to adequately account for how the investigative interview is a product of a social interaction between the interviewer and the child. This thesis applies insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis to analyse the interactional practices of police interviewers and children during investigative interviews into child sexual abuse. The data is derived from 11 videotaped investigative interviews of children aged between 7 and 11 years, conducted by police interviewers in an Australian sexual crimes unit. Close analysis using the method of conversation analysis reveals the extent to which children, by virtue of their conversational competency, are active participants in producing what comes to ultimately be seen as a quality investigative interview.

The first analytic chapter explores interviewer‘s methods for eliciting disclosures from children when moving from rapport-building into the substantive phase of the interview, highlighting how children‘s conversational competencies contribute to the progressivity of the interaction. The analysis demonstrates how children display numerous conversational competencies that facilitate the ease with which this key moment gets worked through to completion, such as recognising and repairing their own person reference problems. It was also found that, contrary to best-practice guidelines, interviewers did sometimes resort to forced choice or closed questions during this stage. But they only did so after attempting to elicit disclosures using more open-ended prompts.

The second analytic chapter focuses on moments where children display audible and visible signs of discomfort when being asked to talk about the details of the alleged sexual abuse. The analysis examines interviewers‘ methods for responding to these moments, such as asking children to draw representations of bedrooms, themselves and the accused, as well as the use of body diagrams. The analysis demonstrates how these ‗props‘ helped restore progressivity to the interaction when it had stalled.

The third analytic chapter explores the ways that children formulate their claims to know or remember things. Children could be seen actively working to represent the extent of their knowing or remembering precisely through their talk. Moreover, it was found that interviewers treated children‘s denials of memory or knowing differently depending on the extent to which they might assume that the child could be expected to know the information.

The final analytic chapter focuses on moments where children‘s talk is occupied with the moral matter of their own response to the accused at the time of an abusive incident. When children were asked about what they said or did when the accused was engaging them in sexual activity, they frequently responded with accounts of how they resisted, why they could not resist, or why they were not culpable. These accounts displayed a moral assumption that a victim should not have had any agency in initiating or willingly participating in the types of activities that constitute sexual abuse.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the four analytic chapters, outlines the implications of the research for investigative interviewing as well as for interviewing children in other contexts, such as clinical assessment and therapy settings, and details the

limitations of the research along with recommendations for how future research of this kind could be improved.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signature .....

Date 7 July, 2010

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped to make this project possible. Thanks go to the families who consented to let me use their children's interviews, and to the children. I doubt I will ever forget the things I have heard you speak about.

People from the Sexual Crimes Investigation Branch deserve special mention. Thank you to Detective Senior Sergeant Peter Shanahan for hearing me out in the first place, and for those black jelly beans, which helped lighten up the slightly intimidating atmosphere. To Superintendent Scott Duvall, thank you for helping to get things moving and taking care of practical concerns, such as where to accommodate me while I transcribed. Thank you also to those in the Prosecution Branch, who regularly dropped by to say hello and find out what I was up to during that year of transcribing in your spare office. A very special thank you goes to Theo Sarantaugas and Helen Athans for always welcoming me to the SCIB so warmly, for keeping the data safe, and for taking care of all the small details, like printing off transcripts on my behalf. Heartfelt thanks also to the interviewers from the Victim Management Section for opening up your practice to my enquiry and for the time you have taken to talk to me and explain how things work.

To my two supervisors, Martha Augoustinos and Lisa Kettler, I am indebted to you for supporting me to pursue this project in spite of its obvious pitfalls in terms of the difficulty of the subject matter and access to data. Thank you also for the clear-eyed insights you have offered along the way, and for the timely encouragement and warmth you have extended to me, particularly when life got in the way of progress at times.

Brooke and Nicole, your friendship since we embarked on Honours together has been truly sustaining. It's been a joy to share this part of life with you and I will miss it greatly.

Shona, Katherine and Victoria thank you for passing along pearls, such as ‗start on a downhill slope', ‗the good enough thesis' and ‗write first'. Thanks also for the ‗stitch and bitch' sessions. I always look forward to them, and sleep so well after laughing so much. To Angie, thank you for your loyal friendship through thick and thin. I look forward to sharing ‗life after the thesis' good times. Stuart and Katie, it has been so much fun riding the conversation analysis learning curve (getting ‗Schegged') with you both. Thanks also to the DASPers for sharing your thoughts and for providing an intellectual community to mitigate the sometimes isolating experience of research in solitude.

Last, but not least, thank you to my family. To Scott, thank you for your love, patience and friendship, for being a loving dad to Xavier, and for those onerous proof-reading services squeezed into a busy life. To mum, thank you for helping with the kids. To Julia, you were just a baby when I felt inspired by you to take this path. I really am done now sweetheart. Xavier, your exceptional sleep routines have played a big part in helping me finish sooner rather than later. To Julia, Xavier, Louis and Audrey, you provide so much fun and laughter, which has helped make these last couple of years rich and memorable as we blend our families.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the memory of baby Caleb Fogarty.