Asymmetry in interaction on a men’s relationship counselling helpline: Managing the competing relevancies of troubles-telling and service provision

Rebecca Rosamaria Feo

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Psychology

University of Adelaide

May 2012
Table of Contents

Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................... i
Abstract .................................................................................................................................... vi
Declaration ............................................................................................................................ viii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................. ix

Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................................. 1
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Overview .............................................................................................................................. 1
  1.2 Men’s health and help-seeking behaviours ........................................................................ 3
    1.2.1 Paradox in men’s health. ............................................................................................... 4
    1.2.2 Hegemonic masculinity. ................................................................................................ 6
    1.2.3 Men’s purported preference for solution-focused outcomes ....................................... 9
    1.2.4 Limitations of the current research on men’s help-seeking. ......................................... 12
  1.3 MensLine Australia ............................................................................................................ 14
    1.3.1 MensLine’s counselling framework. ............................................................................. 15
    1.3.2 Troubles-telling vs. service provision. ........................................................................ 17
  1.4 CA research on helpline interaction ................................................................................... 19
  1.5 Aims of thesis .................................................................................................................... 26
    1.5.1 Outline of chapters. ..................................................................................................... 27
Chapter 2 ........................................................................................................................................30

Method ........................................................................................................................................30

2.1 Overview ............................................................................................................................30

2.2 Data source ........................................................................................................................30

2.3 Data recording and collection ............................................................................................33

2.4 Data transcription ...............................................................................................................35

2.5 Conversation Analysis .......................................................................................................35

  2.5.1 Institutional interaction. ..............................................................................................36

  2.5.2 Turn-taking. .................................................................................................................38

  2.5.3 Sequence organisation. ..............................................................................................40

  2.5.4 Sequence-expansion. .................................................................................................41

  2.5.5 Preference organisation. ..............................................................................................43

2.6 Chapter summary ...............................................................................................................45

Chapter 3 ........................................................................................................................................47

The interactional organisation of call-opening sequences .....................................................47

3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................47

3.2 The structure of mundane telephone call openings ............................................................48

3.3 The structure of institutional telephone call openings ......................................................50

3.4 Call-opening sequences in a men’s relationship helpline ................................................55

  3.4.1 ‘Ringing for advice’ reason-for-call accounts ............................................................66
Chapter 6 .............................................................................................................................. 155
The interactional trouble of caller-complaints in an institutional environment of
solution-focused counselling ................................................................................................ 155
6.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 155
6.2 Complaints ..................................................................................................................... 156
6.3 Complaint sequences in the MensLine corpus .................................................................. 162
6.4 Chapter summary ............................................................................................................. 195

Chapter 7 .............................................................................................................................. 198
Callers’ resistance to counsellors’ attempts to transition out of troubles-talk: An
interactional ‘tug-of-war’ ......................................................................................................... 198
7.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 198
7.2 Perspective-display series and stepwise transition to advice ........................................... 201
7.3 Topic transition ............................................................................................................... 205
7.4 Perspective-display interrogatives ................................................................................. 208
7.5 Callers’ resistance to topic transition .......................................................................... 212
7.6 Chapter summary ............................................................................................................. 244

Chapter 8 .............................................................................................................................. 247
Discussion ........................................................................................................................... 247
8.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 247
8.2 Overview of chapters ....................................................................................................... 247
8.3 Contributions to the field of CA ......................................................................................259
8.4 Contributions to the literature on men’s help-seeking.....................................................262
8.5 Practical implications .......................................................................................................264
8.6 Conclusion .......................................................................................................................267

References .............................................................................................................................276

Appendix A: Information Sheet for Counsellors ..............................................................295

Appendix B: Consent Form for Counsellors .....................................................................298

Appendix C: Transcription Notation .................................................................................299

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this thesis are the researcher’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of MensLine Australia.
Abstract

The present thesis examines the nature of calls to an Australian men’s relationship counselling helpline. The focus is on explicating how the helpline’s institution-specific goals are played out, in practice, in sequences of interaction.

Men’s help-seeking has become a popular topic of academic interest in recent years due to an apparent paradox: in the Western world, men experience greater morbidity and mortality than women, yet are reportedly less likely to seek help for health-related issues. When men do consult health professionals, it is argued that they display a characteristic masculine preference for action-oriented, solution-focused outcomes. To date, most studies describing such male preferences have been based on survey and interview data. Such methods do not provide detailed information about how help-seeking is routinely accomplished, in situ, in naturally-occurring interactions. The present research addresses this limitation by employing Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyse a corpus of 169 calls fielded by a men’s counselling helpline.

Consistent with the mainstream literature on men’s help-seeking, the helpline from which the data in this thesis was collected works from the framework of a solution-focused model of counselling. The helpline has two main aims in its over-the-phone interactions: (1) providing callers an opportunity to talk about their relationship problems, and (2) assisting callers with the development of practical coping strategies and solutions in respect of such problems. These institutional aims correspond to the relevant call-taker categories of troubles-recipient and service provider, respectively. In the CA literature, these categories are often viewed as separate and contradictory in that they orient to two different aspects of talk-in-interaction: whereas a troubles-telling is focused on the teller and his/her experience, a service-encounter is focused on the problem at hand, its properties, and ways to fix it. The
aim in this thesis was to explicate the skilled ways in which counsellors managed the competing relevancies of their dual institutional role in sequences of talk-in-interaction recorded from the helpline.

The analysis showed that when callers indicated that they had called the helpline for the explicit purpose of receiving advice, counsellors oriented to this type of account as a sufficient demonstration of accountability. By contrast, there were a number of interactional difficulties associated with the production of narrative reports on a trouble. These difficulties manifested in sequences of interaction where counsellors attempted to turn the reason-for-call from troubles-telling to service provision, and where callers routinely resisted these attempts. Through an examination of this resistance, a pattern of interactional asymmetry or difference in orientation between caller and counsellor to the purpose of calls taking place between them was described. Whereas the majority of callers appeared to call the helpline for the explicit purpose of ‘talking to’ someone, counsellors routinely oriented to the importance of service provision as well as troubles-receipting in their interactions with callers. This asymmetry arguably has important consequences for the pervasive assumption that men display a preference for solution-focused outcomes, and for the services shaped by this assumption. The implications of this observed pattern for research and institutional practice are discussed.
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.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University’s digital research repository, the Library catalogue and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Rebecca Rosamaria Feo

May, 2012
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my principal supervisor Amanda LeCouteur for her unwavering support during the PhD process. I would like to thank Amanda for her guidance and expertise, and for her endless patience in reading countless (and not always high-quality!) drafts. I have learned so much under her tutelage and have enjoyed developing my analytic skills. Finally, I would like to thank Amanda for her confidence in me and for getting me through the difficult PhD journey.

Second, I would like to thank my secondary supervisor Shona Crabb for her enthusiasm, expertise, and guidance over the past four years. I would like to thank Shona for her continued support and for always putting a smile on my face. It has been a pleasure working with you!

I would particularly like to thank the MensLine counsellors and callers who graciously chose to take part in the study. I would also like to thank the team at MensLine and Crisis Support Services who helped me throughout the journey. In particular I would like to thank Ian Thomas, who consented to the collection of data. I would also like to thank Jenny Anderson, Randal Newton John, and Laura Kennan for their patience in responding to all my questions and for their continued enthusiasm and interest in the project.

I would also like to thank the CA group at the University of Adelaide, and all those who participated in data sessions, for their invaluable comments and feedback on my data.

Importantly, I would like to thank all my friends for keeping me sane throughout the past four years. In particular, I would like to thank Louise and Heather for sharing the PhD journey and for always making me laugh. I will miss our chats together when you embark on your travels (particularly all your pep talks Heather!) but know that there are so many exciting things ahead for both of you. I would also like to thank ‘my twin’ Beth for her much
cherished friendship. I would also like to thank Pat and Jas for their continued friendship over many years and for being a constant source of joy and laughter.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their continued love and support. I would like to thank my big brother for being a source of inspiration for me – even if he doesn’t always know it! Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love, patience, guidance, and encouragement. Without them, this PhD would not have been possible.