

“Please, I need help, please!”: Reflections on Involving Undergraduate Psychology Students  
in a Conversation Analytic Study of 999 and 101 Police Calls

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**Abstract**

*This paper describes a summer Research Assistantship Scheme undertaken by three undergraduate students in the School of Psychology at Keele University. The research used a conversation analytic approach to explore interactions during emergency and non-emergency phone calls to a regional police force in the UK. We will briefly introduce the research undertaken and summarise some of the preliminary patterns of results emerging from the analysis. Here we will be reflecting on the experience of involving undergraduate students in research from both the students' and researcher's perspective. We conclude that summer research assistantship schemes might represent a valuable and often overlooked option for resourcing qualitative research projects whilst also enhancing the provision of qualitative teaching for interested students at undergraduate level.*

**Introduction**

*Background to the Summer Research Assistantship Scheme*

As many QMiP Bulletin readers will know, finding space within a crowded undergraduate psychology curriculum to enable students to explore a range of qualitative research methods can be challenging. Research Experience Schemes and Summer Research Assistantship programmes provide opportunities for interested students to experience approaches to research that are not widely available within degree programmes.

This year, Dr Alexandra Kent was successful in securing funding for three students to work on a research project examining police phone calls:

- Chloe Waterman – 2<sup>nd</sup> year student funded by a BPS Summer RA stipend (8 weeks)

- Prabhjeet Marok – 2<sup>nd</sup> year student funded by a School of Psychology stipend (5 weeks)
- Claire Melia – 3<sup>rd</sup> year student funded by a School of Psychology stipend (5 weeks)

All three students had previous but limited exposure to conversation analysis (CA). Claire recently completed her undergraduate dissertation using CA (supervised by Alexandra). Chloe and Prabhjeet had worked with Alexandra as part of the School of Psychology Research Experience Scheme that enables second year students to assist with staff research projects. All had attended weekly data sessions and seminars covering basic CA and discourse principles throughout the academic year. In this paper we reflect on our experiences working together over a five week period in summer 2015.

### *Background to the research project*

The government and its related criminal justice agencies are increasingly responsible for assessing and managing levels of risk to the public (Kemshall & Wood, 2007). As the sector responsible for the safety of the State's citizens, the 43 regional UK police forces are consistently under scrutiny from the public and must ensure they provide a highly effective service.

The most critical point of contact is the telephone hotlines (999 and 101). The Police control rooms that handle calls from the public are extremely busy and demand effective call handling practices by highly trained operators. A typical Police Control Room would expect to receive over 100,000 emergency calls and 340,000 non-emergency calls in a single year (based on 2014 figures from our partner police force). Emergency calls are a highly specialised form of communication (Wakin & Zimmerman, 1999). They represent a life-altering moment of interaction with potentially mortal consequences for the caller and weighty legal/political consequences for the police force (Svennevig, 2012; Tracy, 2002).

Interaction-based research has revealed the systematic ways in which speakers across multiple interaction settings design their requests differently to indicate the urgency of the situation, their entitlement to expect assistance and the contingencies that might prevent compliance (Heinemann, 2006; Curl & Drew, 2008; Craven & Potter 2010, Antaki & Kent 2012). Furthermore, Larsen (2013) identified that members of the public usually call emergency services for specific reasons and carefully orient their formulation of the situation in line with their perceived level of entitlement to assistance.

In both a Danish (Larsen, 2013) and UK context (Drew & Walker, 2010) direct requests for assistance are not particularly common. Instead descriptions of the situation were the most recurrent formulation for the reason for the call. However, these formulations were excluded from Larsen's (2013) analysis and to date have not been systematically analysed regarding entitlement, urgency and impact on the call's outcome.

The caller's formulation and their stance on urgency and entitlement provides the primary information for call handlers. Call handlers may either immediately accept the caller's request for assistance, accept the request contingent on more information, or decline the request. Our research examines the extent to which Larsen's (2013) findings can be applied to UK police calls. If indeed a similar phenomenon is identified within the UK context, it may raise implications for increasing call handler effectiveness in assessing urgency of situations

based upon caller's initial formulations. Beginning with the openings of police calls and then broadening to consider the wider call, our study uses conversation analysis to explore how requests for help are realised during calls to the police.

## ***Method***

### ***Data***

54 call handlers from our partner police force agreed to select a sample of their calls for use in our research. Data collection is ongoing as part of the wider research programme, but for the summer research scheme we had a working data corpus of 93 calls. Once collected, the data were stored securely and anonymised independently to ensure maximum anonymity and data protection.

### ***Transcription***

Following anonymisation, the student researchers (affectionately regarded as 'minions') took the lead for the transcription phase of the research. We produced basic transcripts of 60 calls in our dataset. We then identified the key extracts likely to be relevant for the analysis and re-transcribed these using the Jefferson (2004) conventions.

### ***Conversation Analysis***

Conversation Analysis (CA) is largely concerned with how our underlying shared knowledge of communication practices allows us to engage effectively with one another (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Despite their unique public service role, emergency calls share common features with institutional interactions (Drew & Heritage, 1992), other types of helplines (Baker, Emmison, & Firth, 2005), and general human interaction.

CA is a data-driven approach to analysis, guided by the principle of "unmotivated examination" (Sacks, 1984, p27). You cannot determine in advance what you will find. Instead the analysis involves describing, at a fine-grained level, what actions the participants are performing and how they are using language to accomplish their actions. As you examine more cases you begin to build up a sense of the patterns that systematically occur across the data.

A crucial element of any CA study is collection building: the process of selecting and identifying relevant extracts from the data in which the phenomenon of interest is evidenced. Given the unusual constraints of the summer scheme (an inexperienced research team and a time pressure of five weeks) the collection building phase needed to be efficient.

Three collections were created during the course of the summer scheme:

#### 1. Call Openings

Alexandra first directed us to transcribe the opening sequences of calls where the caller formulated their reason for calling. Call openings are prevalent within the data corpus; every call must have one. They are easy to locate at the start of each recording, allowing us to quickly identify and transcribe these openings. Also, previous CA literature suggested that call openings were likely to yield rich analytic insights. All these reasons made them an ideal first target for our analysis.

2. Outcomes:

Our various funding applications also specified that we would be looking at how the calls were closed. The analytic interest in call closings lay in exploring how call handlers informed the callers what the police response to their request would be (e.g., immediate dispatch / book an appointment / no action). As soon as we began looking at the data it became clear that outcome decisions were not actually located in the call closing but could occur at any point after the call opening. Outcome decisions were open to challenge or resistance by the caller and so could be revised or recycled multiple times. The collection was therefore more complicated to build than anticipated.

3. Ethnicity questions:

Once we began looking at the data, an unexpected additional analytic focus emerged around a specific interactional project that recurrently caused difficulties or disruptions – asking the caller for their ethnic identity. A third collection was made of all instances when call handlers asked the caller for their ethnicity. Unlike the openings collection, ethnicity questions could occur at any point in the call. Unlike the outcomes collection, ethnicity sequences were typically short and only occurred once in the call. Additionally, for this enquiry we also included comparison cases from a pre-existing dataset of call to the NSPCC in which call handlers asked for the caller's ethnic identity. These instances could be quickly identified through a keyword search of the transcripts.

*Analysis*

Once relevant collections had been identified and the extracts had been transcribed, Alexandra took the lead for the analysis by co-ordinating group data sessions where we looked intensively at individual data extracts before beginning to track patterns across extracts.

Analysis is ongoing and as we reach the end of the summer scheme we have only completed a preliminary analysis of the openings. We found that callers' reasons for calling could be formulated as a bald request with no additional information (e.g., "Could you come and arrest me please?") a simple description with no request (e.g., "There is a chap here lying on my doorstep"), or more often, a combination of the two. The analysis revealed intricate patterning between the elements included in the initial formulation and the likely outcome of the call. These seem to be coalescing around the dimensions of 'Entitlement and contingency' and 'Seriousness and urgency'. More analysis will be needed to fully refine these preliminary observations but it is exciting to begin to see the findings take shape.

***On reflection...***

*Students:*

With limited experience of CA and its practices, the initial introduction was quite daunting. For example, seeing a Jefferson transcript and knowing we were expected to recreate that was a challenging prospect. However, through constant practice and refinement of our transcripts alongside Alexandra's encouragement, we became much more comfortable with these expectations. Now, reading a Jefferson transcript has become more like second nature than a second language. This is a main theme that we have found from the project. Initially

we started as quite tentative and unsure with the research and needed a fair amount of encouragement from Alexandra. As the project progressed we gained confidence with all aspects and could turn to each other more collaboratively and also work more independently, needing less guidance.

In comparison to traditionally taught undergraduate research methods, something unusual about CA is its flexibility. Though the processes are quite rigid, the research questions are malleable. CA uses 'unmotivated examination' with no preconceptions. At first this was very disconcerting as we are so used to using numerical data with a set question and focus in mind. However, the concept became much clearer as the project moved forwards. As the corpus expanded we found that the focus of the project evolved, illustrating the malleable nature of CA and its grounding in the data. Five weeks into the project all of us are much more comfortable with using the rigorous processes of CA without a rigid focus for the project, allowing the data to control the trajectory of the research.

Working as an undergraduate on a professional research project is a rare opportunity in this competitive field and provided each researcher with vital experience. Working closely with Alexandra has been educational on the reality of research practices that are often taught as theory within degree level. Not only have we learnt how to perform CA to a professional standard but the project provided understanding of the psychological research profession which often appears inaccessible.

Through the project we also had the opportunity to attend a DARG (Discourse and Rhetoric Group) meeting at Loughborough University. This experience provided an insight into what true collaboration means within the psychological research profession and how it produces exceptional research. Due to the welcoming and supportive environment of all in attendance, despite our novice nature we were actively encouraged to engage with these high level discussions and build our confidence in the CA field. This experience affirmed the quality of research we are aiming for and increased our confidence in our own abilities to achieve this standard.

This project allowed for development of practical research skills, but also enabled us to experience collaborative working. The project has benefited from the insight and interpretation of all, as Alexandra heavily encouraged discussions and collaboration within the team, helping to develop both research and professional working skills. Not only has Alexandra challenged us but we have challenged each other which has helped to develop our key research skills. This has been a particularly valuable experience and many of the skills we have gained throughout this process are transferable to further psychological studies and professional work settings. The 'minions' are aware that employing undergraduates was a risk for Alexandra for which all are grateful for the opportunity as psychology research experience is particularly difficult to find. We hope that Alexandra has been pleasantly surprised by the outcome of putting her faith in us.

*Alexandra:*

I was initially nervous about collaborating with novice researchers. My fear beforehand was that my time might be spent teaching and scaffolding them and the research itself would not progress during my precious summer research time. I could not have been more wrong!

I have been completely blown away by the quality and quantity of work produced by my 'minions'. During the transcription phase their pace completely outstripped the speed at which I could get the data anonymised. Their Jefferson transcripts also reached a standard where, when I checked them before public presentations, there was nothing I wanted to change. Here I think the shared lab space and the potential for mutual support was invaluable in helping their skills develop rapidly. Each of them improved far more quickly as part of a group than previous research assistants working alone have done in my experience.

I found the early stages of the analysis a stressful process when working with the students. I felt accountable for the (inevitable and entirely normal) initial lack of certainty in the analysis. As the project progressed I increasingly embraced the mindset that the purpose of the summer scheme was to show them 'real' research. I felt they deserved to see that, even as academics, qualitative researchers all struggle in the murky forests of our data until the patterns emerge and we can see the path out of the woods. Once I recognised this I felt happier about sharing my own confusions and false starts with the data and the project really leapt forward.

Once they had seen me change my mind and grapple with the data, the students became more confident about suggesting their own analytic interpretations and challenging me when my own were unconvincing. In short, they became real co-investigators, able to influence the trajectory and conclusions of the research. The end result will be an infinitely stronger and more convincing analysis than I could have hoped to accomplish in this time period by myself alone.

### ***Conclusion - The sum is more than the parts***

This process has been challenging and complicated but over the last five weeks the four of us have formed an effective and productive research team. As students we've gained an insight into academic research that we will take forward in our studies. Alexandra watched as the student researchers blossomed from tentative transcribers to confident co-investigators who brought so much more to the table than any of us had predicted. Based on what each of us has taken away from the last five weeks, we would like to encourage more Psychology Departments to consider making provision to enable researchers to include undergraduate students in their research. Our experience suggests that, if properly invested in (both financially and personally), it has the potential to be a productive and mutually beneficial exchange.

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