A conversation analytical approach to Social Work encounters in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates how Social Work is locally accomplished through social interaction between professional social workers and clients. On the basis of a large corpus of video recordings of Social Work service encounters organized in four different institutions in Portugal, a series of analytical chapters examine diverse interactional activities routinely carried out by social workers and clients, from soliciting clients’ initial concerns to ensuring the continuity of the institutional relationship beyond the scope of the encounter, upon its impending termination, revealing how these activities are locally accomplished through social action.

Examining, in fine detail, how participants carry out key activities for the accomplishment of social intervention – gradually transforming an initial concern with a problematic situation into the formalization of institutional clienthood and its progression beyond the encounter at hand – the analyses reveal how these activities are carried out through a fundamental and pervasive interplay between participants’ orientation to an asymmetric distribution of tasks and knowledge, concern with the moral and institutional order, and focus in managing specific institutional procedures.

METHODOLOGY

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

In this dissertation, I have examined Social Work practice within the framework of Conversation Analysis, a powerful paradigm for investigating the production of social interaction with important applications to understanding how professional social workers accomplish the exercise of social intervention1.

Concerned with the mundane methods whereby social order is produced and interpreted in situ, Conversation Analysis takes an ethnomethodological approach (i.e., concerned with the ‘methods’ employed by ordinary members of society) to the study of social interaction. Grounded on audiovisual recordings of naturally-occurring social interactions, the analysis of participants’ interaction concerns the sequential organization of their interactional conduct, e.g. talk and bodily action, throughout the moment-by-moment unfolding of conversational turn-taking.

Providing important contributions to the study of social activity and its linguistic and embodied organization, Conversation Analysis has been adopted as a crucial framework for understanding a wide diversity of professional domains and institutional settings2, providing evidence of how practical problems emerging within diverse activities are skilfully managed by the participants in a contingent manner, and ultimately revealing how institutions are “talked into being”3.

1 email: david.monteiro@unibas.ch
2 see Sacks (1992); Schegloff (2007); Sidnell & Stivers (2012).
3 see Brinet (2012, 2013); Brinet, Sousa & Monteiro (2014).
4 see Drew & Heritage (1992); Heritage & Clayman (2010); Mondada & Kard (2017).
5 Heritage (1984-290).
6 In conducting this project, I have ensured all formal procedures for data protection (incl. Permission from the national and institutional authorities, obtaining of informed consent from participants, and data anonymization).
7 see Goupee (2013); Mondada (2016).

DATA

VIDEO RECORDINGS OF SOCIAL WORK ENCOUNTERS

The investigation of how Social Work encounters are accomplished through social interaction is grounded on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2013-2016 in four Portuguese institutions, from which resulted a corpus of video recordings4, comprising over 20 hours, 46 encounters and 79 participants.

Within a conversation analytical approach, the fine-grained sequential and multimodal analysis of video recordings of naturally-occurring Social Work encounters, based on its detailed transcription and annotation, provides for identifying some of the interactional activities constituting the in situ exercise of Social Work practice and, moreover, to understand the issues at stake for the participants within its moment-by-moment unfolding. Such shows how these activities are locally accomplished by the participants, through the contingent yet orderly mobilization of linguistic, bodily and material resources, allowing to understand how participants carry out the business at hand in a co-operative manner by demonstrably displaying their orientation to a distribution of tasks between them.

In order to preserve the sequential and temporal organization of the interaction, and the interactionally-relevant details of participants’ conduct, the data was transcribed in conformity with existing conventions for transcribing talk and multimodal5. An example is provided below:

Extract 1 (SWPT_B5, 02.30)

1 FI L  . h£ ( . )  dona ger u#sa+ di ga - m e só o seu no$: m e£ com pl et o 
. h ( ... 
   ger                             --- >+l ooks f or m --- >> 
   im                                  #i m .  3 
3

Each numbered line in the transcript (text in bold) corresponds to the transcription of talk by one of the participants, identified between the line number and the actual transcription. Immediately after the initial line, another line (text in italics) provides an English translation of the original, preserving its basic features (and, in some cases, some more specific aspects).

A detailed analysis of this short extract shows how, through talk and bodily conduct, the participants display their orientation to the task of filling out the application form, hence providing evidence of a central and recurrent feature of institutional interactions – participants’ orientation to an asymmetric distribution of tasks and knowledge.

Such orientation to an asymmetric distribution can be observed as the form-filling activity is launched by the professional who, visibly orienting to the form placed on the table, requests one of the clients to provide her full name (line 1); then, responding in an aligned manner to the prior action, the client provides the requested information (line 2), treating it as not known by the professional, monitoring the social worker’s embodied conduct while she fills out the form.

As they carry out the mundane routine of filling out a form, the participants accomplish an important aspect of the encounter: formalizing the clients’ request for institutional support. Taking a close look at how they do it reveals that this activity is locally organized around participants’ constant mutual monitoring of their co-participants’ activity, so to ensure, moment by moment, the mutual ratification of their joint orientation to normative expectations involved in the distribution of tasks and their participation therein.

OVERVIEW

The dissertation is constituted by the following chapters:
1. Introduction: Social Work, an interactional phenomenon
2. Between informal care and institutional case
3. Soliciting initial presentations of clients’ concerns
4. Searching for sources of informal support
5. Collecting clients’ documents
6. Recommending clients how to seek support outside the institution
7. Closing the encounter
8. Conclusion: understanding Social Work through social interaction

After Chapter 1 overviews existing literature so to introduce the study of Social Work encounters from the perspective of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, Chapter 2 initiated the analysis of data by following the unfolding of a single encounter, organized between a professional social worker and two clients seeking institutional support for their mother; here, a series of extracts will introduce some of the issues that the subsequent chapters will further focus on. Chapters 3 to 5 investigate a set of procedures for assessing eligibility to care service, namely for identifying the situations for which clients seek institutional support, its relation with the social situation of the prospective care recipient, and the documental basis for formalizing clients’ application to institutional support. Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 examine activities related to the management of clients’ institutional careers, such as recommending clients how to pursue support in other institutions, and closing the encounter for the participants to their home. Hence, the dissertation aims at making sense of how the institutional case is to progress beyond the scope of the encounter at hand. Bringing the dissertation to a close, Chapter 8 overviews its main contributions to the study of social interaction and Social Work practice.

In sum, fine-grained transcriptions and detailed sequential analyses of the moment-by-moment unfolding of these activities demonstrate how, through the mobilization of talk, bodily action, and material objects, they are carried out by the participants in a contingent yet concerted manner. Such a video-based conversation analytical approach reveals how Social Work emerges as the situated and embodied accomplishment of the participants, and hence offers a novel contribution to the study of Social Work practice.

PROJECT-RELATED ACTIVITIES

2013-2018:
• 1 book chapter
• 1 journal article
• 16 oral presentations

Forthcoming:
• 1 book chapter
• 1 talk
• 3 oral presentations