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**The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM):
A method for training communication skills as an alternative to simulated
role-play**

Elizabeth Stokoe
Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
Loughborough
LE11 3TU
e.h.stokoe@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM) is an approach to training, based on conversation analytic evidence about the problems and roadblocks that can occur in institutional interaction. Traditional training often relies on role-play, but that differs systematically from the actual events it is meant to mimic and prepare for. In contrast, CARM uses animated audio- and video-recordings of real-time, actual encounters. CARM provides a unique framework for discussing and evaluating, in slow motion, actual talk as people do their jobs. It also provides an evidence base for making decisions about effective practice and communication policy in organizations. This article describes CARM's distinctive practices and its impact on professional development across different organizations. Data are in British English.

Introduction

The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM) is an approach to communication skills training that can be adapted to any sort of workplace or institutional encounter. It is grounded in conversation analytic research and provides an alternative to traditional methods for training and assessing communication skills, which are based in role play or simulation. In this paper, I chart the development of CARM, from its origins in a study of neighbour disputes to its role in challenging stasis in methods for training and assessing people's communication skills. Along the way, I will describe the CARM approach, in terms of its steps and procedures, and give examples of the organization and focus of a CARM training workshop. I will end by locating CARM in the wider contexts of research impact and integrity in *applied conversation analytic research*, which is the focus of this Special Issue.

The Evolution of the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method

CARM is, first and foremost, an approach based on conversation analytic evidence about the sorts of problems and roadblocks can occur in interaction, as well as the techniques and strategies that best resolve and overcome them. The research findings that were to underpin CARM workshops were generated in an ESRC-funded study of neighbour disputes (e.g., Stokoe & Edwards, 2009). The project was designed around collecting naturally-occurring data from contexts in which neighbours might talk to one another and engage in defining what counted as a ‘good neighbour relationship’. In addition to police-suspect investigative interviews in cases of neighbour crime, and calls into various local authority council offices, I approached community mediation services to ask if they might record encounters between mediators and clients. Although some mediators agreed, many did not. Instead, services offered to record their initial inquiry calls into their offices. For mediators, these calls were not ‘mediation proper’, and so they were less concerned about a researcher studying them. From our perspective, the data were ideal for a study of neighbour disputes because they comprised a naturally occurring survey of the causes of disputes, as well as an opportunity to examine the ways that neighbour complaints were formulated (e.g., Edwards, 2005; Stokoe, 2009). Towards the end of the project, the focus turned away from analysing the design of neighbour complaints and towards the organization of initial inquiries themselves, and, in particular, whether or not callers became clients of community mediation organizations by the end of their encounter with a mediator. Given that the services are generally free, it was surprising that many callers were not ‘converted’ into clients.

As conversation analysts, we know that our data provides the basis for ‘naturally-occurring experiments’ which can, because of the ‘next turn proof procedure’, generate evidence about the effectiveness or otherwise of communicative practices. In my analysis of initial inquiries to mediation services, I found that certain types of mediator question were more likely than others to generate a positive response from callers. I also categorized ways of explaining mediation as a service as (in)effective, demonstrated by callers’ responses. By collecting such endogenous measurements, CA provides evidence of the outcomes achieved with ‘interactional nudges’, from uncovering how customers are encouraged to pay ‘gift aid’ on their entrance fee in an art gallery (Llewellyn, n.d.) to the difference one word can make to reduce patients’ unmet concerns in consultations with GPs (Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett & Wilkes, 2007). By identifying practices that led to successful and unsuccessful outcomes, I generated research-based information for mediators to better engage callers and convert them into clients: a bottom-line issue for services (e.g., Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Stokoe, 2013a).

This research fed into the development of CARM which, using anonymized recordings presented in real time with technical transcripts, takes trainees through the live development of actual service encounters, stopping to discuss, then explain, the practices that work, or do not work (Stokoe, 2011). A workshop is developed by selecting extracts from research findings about a particular practice (e.g., explaining a service). In workshops, animation software is used to play the audio and transcript synchronously. This means that workshop participants live through conversations without knowing what is coming next, and then ‘role-play’ what they might do next to handle the situation. If party A makes a particular comment, how might party B respond most appropriately? Participants discuss likely responses in small groups and report to the whole group. At that point party B’s actual response is played. Participants evaluate what party B did, report back to the whole group. Participants see and evaluate different responses, identifying effective practice on the basis of what actually happens in real interaction. CARM provides participants with a unique

opportunity to examine communicative practices in forensic detail, and to understand what works from a rigorous empirical basis.

Since 2010, over 200 CARM workshops have been delivered to local, regional and national mediation and alternative dispute resolution organizations in the UK and USA. I also developed similar workshops for police officers, based on research with Derek Edwards on investigative interviews (e.g., Edwards & Stokoe, 2011). CARM is currently crossing into other sectors (e.g., medicine, commercial sales) and is being used by other conversation analysts who have been trained to use the technology to produce CARM's distinctive line-by-line methodology. It has been described recently as "the most significant development" in "the context of the need for CA to make its findings more relevant for lay practitioners" (Emmison, 2012). I will return to issues of application and research impact at the end of this article.

What problem does CARM address?

CARM uses actual interaction, and analyses thereof, as the basis for training. This is in sharp contrast to the communication training world at large, which uses, almost exclusively, role-play and simulation to both train and assess people's skills. Simulation methods involve people-in-training, from call-centre workers and corporate business managers to doctors and police officers, interacting with actors or other simulated interlocutors, using "narrative adaptations" of hypothetical or actual scenarios as the basis for the encounter (Van Hasselt, Romano & Vecchi, 2008: 254). The guiding assumption of such encounters is that they mimic sufficiently 'real life' interactional events to be effective in two ways: to practice the conversational moves that would comprise an actual encounter, and to assess what participants do in an actual encounter.

However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Stokoe, 2013b), the authenticity of role-played interaction is assumed and asserted, but largely untested. Indeed, I have shown that there are some striking differences between simulated and actual encounters. For instance, in my research comparing real police investigative interviews with simulations, I found that paid actors playing the part of suspects often did things that real suspects did not – because they could; because the consequences for them were not as they would be for a real suspect in a real interview. I also found that officers in training did things that they did not do in actual encounters. A number of differences emerged between the two datasets, in terms of the way actions such as eliciting suspects' names or explaining rights to legal representation were accomplished. In simulations, such actions were unpacked more elaborately, exaggeratedly, or explicitly, ensuring that particular features of their talk were made interactionally visible. A useful analogy might be taking a driving test and showing the examiner that 'I am looking in the rear-view mirror' by gesturing one's head unambiguously towards it.

My comparative analysis had a number of implications, including the importance of doing such comparative work in other settings, particularly in medical and healthcare interaction where role-play is used pervasively, to challenge the stasis of simulation as the only way to train professionals. Conversation analysts are well-placed to interrogate traditional communication training methodologies because their research focuses on the hard-to-collect data – the actual interaction. Collecting simulated encounters for comparison might itself be comparatively straightforward to acquire.

The CARM approach: The landscape of interaction and racetracks, projects and slots

Having set out the basic CARM approach, and CARM's 'rhetorical other' in traditional role-play, I move on now to flesh out a CARM workshop with some examples, including some

techniques that work to engage participants themselves. The format of workshops continues to evolve as technology improves. Having developed and delivered so many training events, I have learned a number of things that work well with professional, non-academic and, more relevantly, non-CA audiences. Examining the anonymized talk of people doing the work that participants do is often instantly compelling; there is also a ready fit between CA research (in which analysts make explicit members' own analyses of each turn as an interaction unfolds), and showing conversational data to non-CA audiences, because the conceptual gap between research and practice is small.

That said, I have found that several analogies and phrases work well to engage participants. I have recently begun to get participants to see conversation as a kind of *racetrack* with a distant *architecture*. We start a conversation, or race, with a recipient or recipients, and, along the way, complete various *projects* (greetings, openings, reason for call, and so on). As researchers, we study multiple instances of the same type of interaction and, in so doing, discern the *landscape* of the racetrack and its overall organization and structure. People may anticipate and avoid ditches or hurdles or run into them, knocking the interaction off course. So, for example, telephone calls between an organization and a client or potential client may involve projects such as opening the call, explaining the reason for the call, explaining problems, explaining services, offering services, making appointments, and closing the call. Analysis focuses on how those projects are designed, as well as the *slots* that open up for both parties to fill with a variety of different things (see Sacks, 1992). We can see how different designs lead to different conversational trajectories or outcomes, either avoiding or falling into the racetrack's hurdles and ditches. Explaining a service one way may lead to higher client uptake; it can be the difference between winning and losing the race.

CARM helps people to understand the landscape of their particular workplace or professional racetrack. Because a great deal of research on communication does not start where CA starts – with an analysis of people actually doing their job – the racetracks themselves are often completely unstudied. Or, to use another analogy, most research leaves actual interaction in an un-analysed interactional black box. CARM works by turning analyses of racetracks into evidence-based training materials. Participants are exposed, often uniquely in their careers, to the actual activities of anonymized colleagues doing the job that participants themselves do, usually from an organization based in some other part of the country. As one participant commented in feedback, “The fact that it was ‘real’, as opposed to role-play was a relief. It was so much better, and more interesting and motivating, to deal with reality as opposed to made-up scenarios and acting.”

From caller to client (1): Asking dangerous questions

One set of workshops has been built from studies of the initial inquiries, or intake calls, that people make to mediation services. As I have shown elsewhere (Stokoe, 2013a), callers to mediation services typically do not know anything about mediation and have often been given the number by another organisation. It is a challenge, then, for call-takers to sell an unknown service to someone who did not know they wanted that service in the first place. But describing and selling mediation to potential clients is something that can be done in different ways. Some ways work, others do not. This matters, because if mediators only manage to convert a small number of callers into clients, then the service will struggle to survive. Indeed, several of the services from whom I originally collected data no longer exist.

In describing the evolution of CARM from an initial study of neighbour disputes, I noted that I was granted access to initial inquiry calls more often than mediation encounters themselves. With hindsight, it is interesting that, to the best of my knowledge, mine is the only research that has analysed such calls; mediation research focuses on mediation ‘proper’;

on what happens *after* someone has become a client. Similarly, training focuses on mediator-client communication, rather than on what it takes to engage a client in the first place. The landscape of intake calls to mediation has, until now, been unknown.

When people call a mediation service, their first substantive project is to explain the problem they are having with their neighbour, partner, or whomever they are having a dispute with. After the caller has explained their problem, the mediator launches a project of their own with a question about what the caller has done so far to try and resolve things. In a workshop, an instance of this question is played. Extract 1 is an example, and the commentary afterwards reflects the kinds of workshop discussion that it stimulates.

Extract 1a: DC-27

1 M: Have you spoken to her about it at all.

The first step is to get participants to reflect on the question. Mediators often recognise it as a key ‘project on the racetrack’; as something they often ask themselves. What they do not know, at this point, is that the question is a dangerous one to ask; it constructs a hurdle on the racetrack almost immediately. I encourage mediators to think about possible responses to the question; what the caller might fill their ‘slot’ with. They begin to see that a response such as, “Ah! I hadn’t thought of that! I will talk to her immediately. Thank you!”, is unlikely; the question is seeking information rather than giving advice. Instead, they start to understand that the answer to this question is likely to be a negative one, particularly with regards to *talking* to the other party in some way. And, of course, talking to the other party is the business of mediation.

M’s question is what Edwards and Stokoe (2007) called the ‘self-help’ question. A general feature of service provision is what has been called in different contexts ‘counsel-ability’, ‘doctor-ability’, ‘police-ability’, and so on – where it is established that a given problem is appropriate for whatever service is being called upon (e.g., Edwards, 2001; Heritage & Robinson, 2006; Meehan, 1989; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990). When recruiting outside, expert help to solve a problem, there are often things people should already have done to help themselves. So, when seeking medical help for a headache, people may report to the doctor that they have already tried over-the-counter headache pills, and anticipate receiving expert help that they could not achieve for themselves. Let us see the caller’s response to M’s question.

Extract 1b: DC-27

1 M: Have you spoken to her about it at all.

2 C: I won’t speak to ’er.

C’s response is a reason why self-help, in this case, talking, has not worked. Logically, any caller’s answer to this question has to be something negative; it has to show why talking has failed, or that it has not been attempted, for some reason. In this slot, callers most often imply that the other party is ‘the kind of person you can’t talk to’, or is someone who generates strong negative emotions in the caller. Such responses leave the mediator with a challenge: to sell their service, a talk based solution to the problem, to someone who has *just said* talking does not work. It would be like a doctor offering an over-the-counter headache pill to a patient who has told them that they have already tried it. But here, the caller has been *provided* with a slot to say that talking does not work by the mediator asking the self-help question in the first place. By asking the question, the mediator has built a hurdle to

overcome. What very often happens next is that mediators simply move onto their next project, which is to explain the talk-based solution of mediation. Participants begin to understand that can the end of the race is close.

In CARM workshops, we pause here. Participants discuss, in small groups, what they might do next, at line 3. After five minutes or so, one person in the group feeds back to the whole cohort. It often interesting to hear the different sorts of strategies mediators suggest using and extracts can often generate real controversy about professional practice. Then we see what the real mediator did in response.

Extract 1c: DC-27

- 1 M: Have you spoken to her about it at all.
- 2 C: I won't speak to 'er.
- 3 M: No.=but 'as it- *u-* (0.3) right.

The mediator's response exposes the *hurdle* on the racetrack, as well as the fact that she did not *know* her racetrack; she was not ready for the negative response from the caller with a strategy to move things along productively. And this continues across the next couple of turns.

Extract 1d: DC-27

- 1 M: Have you spoken to her about it at all.
- 2 C: I won't speak to 'er.
- 3 M: No.=but 'as it- *u-* (0.3) right.
- 4 C: If- I speak to her I'll- I'll probably hit her.
- 5 M: .hhh Bu- if- it's- what I'm- I'm just wondering how um:: have- have-

In these extracts, then, we can see that a self-help question initiates a sequence which provides for callers to start to resist possible ways forward into a talk-based solution. They do this throughout intake calls, by characterising their neighbour as 'the kind of person you can't talk to'. It is, in fact, the main way callers turn down offers of mediation (Stokoe, 2013a). Of course, not all mediators handle things in the same way; not all mediators ask the self-help question in the first place, and some have methods for overcoming the hurdle constructed when callers characterise the other party as 'the kind of person you can't talk to', or 'the kind of person who won't co-operate'. CARM workshops include different question designs and mediator practices for handling callers' tricky answers. As the workshop proceeds, participants begin to build up methods for engaging prospective clients, grounded in what real mediators do. And these methods are, of course, the *endogenous practices* that are revealed by CA.

From caller to client (2): Selling an unknown service

Another 'project on the racetrack' in intake calls is for mediators to explain what mediation involves. Analysis revealed that this information can be packaged in different ways, particularly with regards to the way mediators explain 'impartiality'. Inside the 'naturally occurring experiments' of conversational data, we can see the effectiveness of different explanations by examining how callers respond to them. The extract below is typical of one way that mediators explain the impartiality of the process. Before seeing this explanation, I often ask mediators to produce an explanation of impartiality that they might use on their organization's website.

Extract 2a: HC-7

- 1 M: We wouldn't take sides, we wouldn't- (0.7) try an' decide who's right
2 or wrong but would- .hh would try to help you both um:: (0.8)
3 sort out uh: the differences between: (0.2) between you.

Across the data, I found was that explanations like this one, that include phrases like “we don't take sides”, “we don't decide who's right or wrong”, as well as other things like “we don't have any authority” or “we don't offer solutions”. These phrases co-occurred with the caller saying ‘no’ to mediation. However, these sorts of phrases are regularly used by mediators to explain the process, including on their websites. After discussing M's explanation, the caller's response is revealed.

Extract 2b: HC-7

- 1 M: We wouldn't take sides, we wouldn't- (0.7) try an' decide who's right
2 or wrong but would- .hh would try to help you both um:: (0.8)
3 sort out uh: the differences between: (0.2) between you.
4 (2.5)
5 C: Well I-hh (1.2) to be quite honest I don't think she'd cooperate.

Because callers have phoned up with a one-sided problem – it is the other party's fault – the offer of a *two-sided* solution is generally unattractive. As noted earlier, callers take opportunities to negatively characterize the other party, and this kind of account, that the other party is ‘the kind of person who won't mediate’, was commonly used in callers' rejections of mediation as a course of action. Explanations of mediation that focused on process and procedure, and did not include phrases like “we don't take sides”, were more effective in keeping callers engaged and more likely to agree to mediate.

By this point in workshops, participants have learned a lot about CA's technical transcription, and know that the silence at line 4, when it is played, as indicative of upcoming bad news. What they see is that, at line 4, what does *not* happen is an enthusiastic response to M's explanation. Again, they discuss what they might do in response to line 5.

Extract 2c: HC-7

- 1 M: We wouldn't take sides, we wouldn't- (0.7) try an' decide who's right
2 or wrong but would- .hh would try to help you both um:: (0.8)
3 sort out uh: the differences between: (0.2) between you.
4 (2.5)
5 C: Well I-hh (1.2) to be quite honest I don't think she'd cooperate.
6 (0.4)
7 M: N:o:.

I found that some mediators have effective ways to handle this most common route out of mediation. However, M does not: he does not know his racetrack. He does not know that this way of formulating mediation is likely to generate such a response, and does not have a strategy for handling it. In CARM workshops, I present a number of explanations that do not work, and a number that do. Again, mediators are able to see directly how to engage prospective clients from the evidence playing out in front of them.

From CARM-Talk to CARM-Text

Until recently, CARM focused on recording spoken encounters and turning analytic findings into training for practitioners. I have recently also developed CARM-Text, which takes analyses of spoken interaction and applies them to an organization's written communication with its clients and users, across websites, posters, leaflets, letters and so on (see Stokoe, 2014). Text has to deal with the same hurdles as talk, but in different ways. Talk involves dealing with hurdles as they arise, in an unfolding interaction. Texts are constructed to *pre-empt and avoid* those hurdles in the first place; smoothing out the racetrack before any real-time dialogue takes place. If we know what works and does not work in explanations of mediation from the 'naturally-occurring experiments' provided by the sorts of CA research discussed so far, we can translate those findings to finding to the realm of written communication, helping to ensure that any explanations of mediation on an organization's website, or posters and so on, do not include the same phrases that we know are unlikely to appeal to prospective clients. CARM-Text has been used by several mediation services as well by the UK Ministry of Justice to revise their marketing of family mediation.

CARM and Applied Conversation Analysis: Concluding Remarks

This *Special Issue* of *ROLSI* showcases a number of real world interventions in practice and training based on CA research, and demonstrates CA's evolving track record for producing research with impact. Since CA's inception, there have been debates about the relative value and appropriate analytic focus of 'pure' or 'basic' and 'applied' or 'institutional' CA, and I will not rehearse those debates here (see, for example, Antaki, 2011). However, one question that arises is whether or not using the methods and empirical findings of conversation analytic research can be used to deliver practitioner and user interventions while maintaining the integrity of the academic endeavour (see Stokoe, Hepburn & Antaki, 2012). Which sites do we choose to study? On whose 'side' do we intervene? Much CA research focuses on the sorts of 'socially responsible' agencies and social services that are represented in this *Special Issue* (for example, primary medical care in Robinson and Heritage, 2014 / this volume; speech therapy in Beeke et al, 2014 / this volume, Koole and Mak, 2014 / this volume, and Wilkinson, 2014 / this volume; welfare services in Drew et al, 2014 / this volume; neurological diagnosis, in Jenkins and Reuber, 2014 / this volume; and telephone helplines in Hepburn et al, 2014 / this volume). For this reason, CA-based interventions have a ready *academic integrity*. Furthermore, CA-based interventions have *epistemic integrity*. In the world of untested communication skills training programmes, for which the simulations used have no empirical basis to their claims of authenticity, CARM and related approaches deliver workplace interventions grounded uncompromisingly in empirical findings about the communicative practices that comprise the setting.

In the last two years, CARM's reach and impact has proliferated. CARM workshops were accredited by the UK College of Mediators, meaning that participants are awarded 'Continuing Professional Development' points ('CPD') which practitioners must accrue each year. The route to CPD is one way of developing wider audiences and demand for training interventions, as well as to generating interest in CA research and changing the culture of communication training (see Meagher, 2013, on the impact of CARM). Furthermore, CARM has recently been commercialized CARM as a not-for-profit social enterprise (www.carmtraining.org), securing private as well as public sector clients and generating income to employ researchers and cross-subsidize workshops for third sector organizations. It also won a Loughborough University Enterprise Award and has been the subject of a number of public engagement activities. Such activities might be steps too far for some. So I will

conclude with four positive points about CARM's proliferation. First, in a world of limited research council funds, it generates income to support CA research and researchers. Second, it has provided CA researchers with a tried-and-tested method for intervention that was developed with research council funding, providing leverage for further funding. Third, like the work presented in other papers in this *Special Issue*, it shows how what I refer to as 'designedly large-scale qualitative research' can create impact and underlines the clear differences between CA and more traditional qualitative forms of inquiry such as interviews. Finally, it brings CA to wide audiences who begin to understand the potential of studying interaction scientifically.

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