Criminal Justice Social Work Practice and the Study of Interaction

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Introduction

A great deal of research has focused on identifying effective practices for reducing the risks of re-offending among people in the criminal justice system and looking at how people move away from crime. However, little research has analysed actual interactions between criminal justice practitioners and service users in order to understand how these practices work in action. This document outlines how these interactions can be analysed and explains the potential benefits to knowledge and practice in criminal justice settings.

What does previous research say about criminal justice practice?

Previous research has identified key principles for effective interventions for reducing offending, such as matching the intensity of the intervention to the risk of re-offending, targeting those factors that are amenable to change and most closely related to offending behaviour, and using cognitive-behavioural methods that are matched to clients' preferred learning styles (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). It also highlights key practice skills assisting people to move away from offending behaviour, such as demonstrating accurate empathy, respect, warmth, and therapeutic genuineness; establishing a 'therapeutic relationship' or 'working alliance' based on mutual understanding and agreement about the nature and purpose of treatment; using an approach that is person-centred, or collaborative and client-driven; and the use of pro-social modelling (Dowden & Andrews, 2004; McNeill et al., 2005, p. 3). Recent research has shown that the skills can be taught and that the greater use of these skills leads to reductions in re-offending (Raynor, Ugwudike & Vanstone, 2014).

Research on desistance – that is, the process by which people move away from offending behaviour – takes a slightly different starting point, focusing on the individual's own processes of change rather than the intervention. Some of this research takes a 'life course' approach, following people over a period of years to identify which factors are related to reductions in offending behaviour. For instance, Sampson and Laub (1992) found 'social bonds', such as the positive influences related to getting married or attaining a good job, were associated with desistance from crime. Other studies have focused on ex-offenders' accounts of their move away from crime. For instance, Maruna (2001) interviewed a number of people who had been involved in offending behaviour and analysed their accounts. He showed that desistance was associated with 'redemption scripts', which portrayed the individual as a changed person, especially through taking on a more positive role in society whereby they provided help to others. Research that connects ex-offenders accounts with other changes in their lives suggests that desistance is a result of both 'objective' changes in someone's life – e.g., employment, stable relationships – and the 'subjective' assessment of those changes in that they provide a 'reason to go straight' (Farrall, 2002). In this regard, it has been suggested that desistance has at least two aspects: 'primary desistance', whereby a person has a period that does not involve offending behaviour; and 'secondary desistance', whereby they take on an identity that is not associated with offending (McNeill, 2006).

As yet, very little research has explored processes of desistance in the context of criminal justice services by using qualitative research methods. Analysing interaction in this way offers the potential to understand how key practice skills are used by practitioners and received by criminal justice service users. It also offers an opportunity to see how identity processes, such as 'secondary desistance', are evident in practice contexts and how they relate to service delivery.

How can practice be analysed?

Discourse analysis and conversation analysis are qualitative methods that can be used to explore interactions as they unfold (Woffitt, 2005) and can be applied to audio and video recordings and transcriptions. Discourse analysis treats language as actively constructing reality, rather than merely reflecting a pre-existing reality, and as fulfilling a range of social functions (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). For instance, analysing discourse in this way brings attention to the way that people do things with words, including blaming, justifying and criticising, as well as the way that identities are constructed and function in interaction. Conversation analysis is a more fine-grained approach that focuses on the detail of interaction, including turn-taking in conversations, the way that people make or receive advice, and how people produce or manage compliments and invitations (Liddicoat, 2011; ten Have, 2007). Both of these approaches are often drawn upon together under the name 'Discursive Psychology' (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

These approaches have been applied to a range of practice contexts, including: doctor-patient interactions (Heritage & Maynard, 2005); child protection help-lines (Butler, Potter, Danby, Emmison & Hepburn, 2010); police suspect interrogations (Stokoe & Edwards, 2008); neighbour mediation services (Stokoe, 2013a); psychotherapy (Fitzgerald, 2013); and social work services (Hall, Juhila, Matarese & van Nijnatten, 2014). By analysing video or audio recordings of face-to-face or telephone interactions, this research provides insight into interaction in institutional settings, and how practices work, as well as highlighting barriers to effective practice and how they may be overcome.

Example analysis of criminal justice practice

The following example draws on an extract from a video recording of a groupwork programme for addressing domestic abuse. The transcription symbols are explained in the appendix. The names are pseudonyms; Stan and Sally are the social workers and the other men are the group members. The extract forms part of a discussion on children and parenting. Prior to this extract, Fred was talking about his relationship with his son and stated that his ex-partner's current partner is 'better' than him.

1	Stan	aye (.) but why- why would d'ya know (.)
2		why would you say this guy's a better man than you? (.)
3	Dave	[(unclear)
4	Fred	[coz he's done everything
5	Stan	((shrugs while looking at Dave, then looks back to Fred))
6	Fred	(.) what you're supposed to do, he's got a car (.) he's got a hoose he's
7	Stan	got a job
8	Sally	((to group)) do [possessions matter?
9	Fred	[he's got a job
10	Stan	((to Fred)) yep (.) mm-hmm
11	Sally	((to Fred)) do possessions matter?
12	Carl	((shakes head))
13	Dave	but [Fred see
14	Fred	[aye they do actually (.)
15	Dave	it's the quality time you spend with the kid than what you give the kid (.) know what I mean and (.)
16		what I'm hearing right now (.) you're doing your best (.) I mean that's all you can do=
17	Ed	=mm-hmm ((nodding))
18	Dave	seriously (.) you [cannae
19	Fred	[that's all I've ever done
20	Dave	you cannae say oh ((points forward)) (.) look what he's give him (.) you gave him (.) the best thing
21		you can gi', is your love (1.0) and don't put yourself down (.) just coz you've not got the money

Analysis of this extract allows the exploration of 'non-offender' identities and how they are engaged with in interactions between practitioners and service users. From lines 1-2, Stan can be seen to question the comparison that Fred has made with his ex-partner's current partner. Fred's response uses the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), 'everything', as a way of suggesting that the man he is describing has a completely appropriate and responsible way of living. The implication then is that Fred has not done what he is 'supposed' to do (i.e., through being involved in offending behaviour and ending up in the criminal justice system). Fred continues with a list of conventional attributes of successful adulthood: 'he's got a car (.) he's got a hoose'. Stan, the social worker completes the three part list (Jefferson, 1991) with 'got a job', showing his understanding of Fred's argument and a degree of agreement with it.

A notable aspect of Stan's completion is that Fred has said, at a prior point in the session, that he doesn't have a job, marking him in opposition to the man he is describing. Stan's initial questioning at lines 1-2 marks him as taking a slightly different position to the topic compared with Fred, particularly as marked by the use of 'but' and the hesitancy and disfluency ('why- why would d'ya know (.)') before the question is fully articulated. However, firstly his completion of the three-part list, secondly Fred's echoing of 'he's got a job', and thirdly Stan's agreement with Fred at line 10, all show that they come into relative alignment with each other. Stan is showing affiliation with Fred through demonstrating empathy (Stokoe, 2013a), a recognised aspect of effective practice (McNeill et al., 2005).

While Stan is affiliating with Fred at this point, Sally steps in to question Fred's formulation of success: 'do possessions matter?' (lines 8 & 11). She challenges the connection Fred has made between material goods and the moral and comparative category of being a 'better man' than him. At

this point (line 12), Carl's negative head shake supports Sally's implied disagreement with Fred's argument. Dave enters next (line 13) to also question Fred's comments. Fred, in the face of Sally's question, restates that possessions do 'matter' (line 14). Dave then argues: 'Fred it's the quality time you spend with the kid (rather) than what you give the kid'. Addressing the proverbial notion of 'quality time' being more important than worldly goods to Fred, Dave pushes both Fred toward agreement and the closing of the argument.

Dave shifts his stance from disagreement to provide an alternative interpretation of Fred's self-criticism 'you're doing your best'. Fred's response at line 19 – 'that's all I've ever done' – could be read as somewhat ambivalent: it implies both that he has always given this quality time and that he has only been able to give quality time (i.e., rather than providing materially for his son). Dave continues along this line of argument, and uses hypothetical reported speech – 'oh look what he's give him' – to criticise or undermine the legitimacy of focusing on what the current partner has done, shifting the focus on to what Fred has done. Through another extreme case formulation – 'you gave him (.) the best thing you can gi', is your love' – Dave portrays Fred's caring for his son as highly valuable and downgrades the importance of material wealth: 'just coz you've not got the money'.

Whereas previous research on 'resistance' has tended to focus on the ways that service users may resist accepting stigmatised identities (Juhila, Caswell & Raitakari, 2014), here we can see that service users may resist positive identities and evaluations as well, such as being a good father. The close analysis of the unfolding interaction shows the stepwise way that practitioners and service users move between affiliation and disaffiliation as they undertake their work. We also saw here how, as a team, the social workers

could distribute the work of demonstrating understanding, showing empathy and questioning of the moral categorisations that their users were applying to themselves. Although we are only touching on the complexities within one session and are not addressing how things change across multiple sessions, we have begun to show how the analysis of recordings of real world social work can illuminate our understanding of the use of practice skills and explore their relationships with desistance processes.

How can this approach be used for knowledge exchange?

This approach has potential for knowledge exchange, because it allows researchers and practitioners to explore practice collaboratively, building findings and recommendations from bottom-up research. It both then increases knowledge as well as informing service provision. The approach is based on Professor Liz Stokoe's Conversation Analytic Role-play Model (CARM). It involves educating practitioners about the basics of conversation analysis, and playing extracts of interactions, stopping them at key points so practitioners can explore the data and identify implications for practice. CARM has been applied to police interviews and community mediation, leading to a better understanding of effective practice and improved training of practitioners (Stokoe, 2013a, 2013b).

At the University of Edinburgh in April 2014, 35 stakeholders – mostly criminal justice social workers – came together to discuss the methods and preliminary findings from the research project on criminal justice groupwork. At the event, we discussed preliminary findings and had breakout sessions, using Professor Liz Stokoe's Conversation Analytic Role-play Method. This involved engaging with video recorded re-enactments of extracts from criminal justice groupwork sessions where the recording was stopped after the first few lines of dialogue to ask questions such as: "What is going on here?", "What might happen next?" and "As a practitioner, what would you do next?" The idea is that a close analysis of specific instances of practice helps to make explicit key aspects of effective practice and encourages reflective practices that are informed by an understanding of interaction.

Key points

Previous research has tended not to use recordings of real-world social work to explore and understand criminal justice practice in action and its relationship with processes of desistance. Discourse analysis and conversation analysis allow us to understand interactions as they unfold from the participant's perspective. They use audio and video recordings accompanied by detailed transcripts. Analysing interaction in this way offers insights into how key practice skills are used by practitioners and received by criminal justice service users. The approach is well suited to knowledge exchange, because researchers and practitioners collaboratively analyse interactional data to gather knowledge of criminal justice practices on the ground.
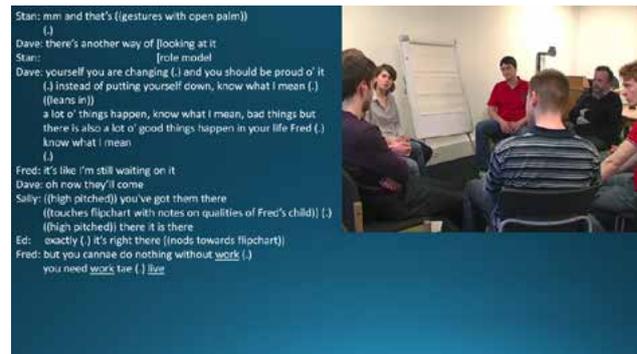
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Appendix: Transcription symbols

These symbols have been adapted from Jefferson (2004).

[ ]	Square brackets indicate overlapping speech. They are placed to indicate the position of the overlap.
(0.8)	Numbers in round brackets indicate pauses in seconds (in this case, eight-tenths of a second).
(.)	A full stop in rounded brackets indicates a micro pause (that is, a pause that is too short to time).
right=	Equals signs indicate 'latching', where there is no pause between one speaker and another.
((name))	Double rounded brackets indicate actions, describe words that have been removed in order to maintain confidentiality or otherwise include notes from the transcriber.
w-	Hyphens indicate sounds and words that have been cut off.
yeah?	Question marks indicate a 'questioning' (i.e., rising) intonation.