

The Discourse of Child Counselling

Ian Hutchby

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam/Philadelphia



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hutchby, Ian.

The discourse of child counselling / by Ian Hutchby.

p. cm. -- (Studies in language and society, ISSN 1385-7908 ; v. 21)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Children of divorced parents. 2. Counseling. 3. Conversation analysis. 4. Sociolinguistics. I. Title.

HQ777.5.H88 2007

362.7--dc22

2006101276

ISBN 978 90 272 1859 9 (Hb; alk. paper)

ISBN 978 90 272 1860 5 (Pb; alk. paper)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

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Volume 21

The Discourse of Child Counselling
by Ian Hutchby

Acknowledgements

This book addresses the nature of talk and social interaction in one form of child counselling: non-clinical ‘helping’ talk designed specifically for young children whose parents are in the process of separation or divorce. In order to analyse this child counselling discourse, it was necessary for me to record naturally-occurring sessions which were then transcribed. The whole project thus hung on the thread of children’s (and their parents’) consent to their counselling sessions being recorded. I am immeasurably grateful to those individuals who granted such consent—even though they must, for reasons of confidentiality, remain anonymous. Without them this book simply would not exist.

I am enormously grateful too to the child counsellors whose work, in that it represents the ‘other half’ of the child counselling dialogue, inevitably comes under scrutiny in these pages. My aim is not, and never has been, to assess, evaluate or criticise the techniques of the individual counsellors who agreed to allow my recording equipment into their offices. The book is not about finding out what is ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ with child counselling; it is about describing and analysing how it is done on the ground, as it were. There are many books available that purport to demonstrate to counsellors how it should be done. This book’s sole aim is to reveal how it is done; how the complex work of counselling young children is accomplished amid the practical contingencies of talk-in-interaction.

The research on which the book is based was supported by the UK’s major funder of social science research, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). When I started work on collecting the data, I had no idea what the outcomes of the research might be; nor, indeed, was I at all certain that there would turn out to be a research project at all, given that I was entirely reliant on the agreement of young children and their (usually) estranged parents before any data could be gathered. It is gratifying, therefore, that a body as large-scale and apparently outcomes-oriented as the ESRC could demonstrate a willingness still to fund radical and ‘blue sky’ projects such as this one. For me, this acts as a welcome indication that those of us who work in the field of conversation analysis can still produce research that is valued by the mainstream social science organisations. This is important, for I believe that while it is easy to see this kind of research as necessarily on the margins of—or even incommensurate with—‘conventional’ sociology, in fact it is vital that conversation analysts convey the relevance of their studies for the range of interests at the core of the discipline.

There is one caveat that must be mentioned. This book does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of all possible types of child counselling. Like any conversation analyst, I am restricted by the data I have before me, and these were drawn from particular, and specialised, sources. Child counselling itself is a highly specialised practice currently only available in selected locations (unlike, say, psychotherapy, marriage counselling or family therapy, all of which are related yet very different concerns). The small but growing professional literature on child counselling techniques also attests to the inevitability that there exists a wide range of different ways of going about doing the work. Therefore, this book should not be read as a generic account but as a description and analysis of the nuanced practices of child counselling as observed in one particular type of setting.

Nevertheless, the issues from which I start in the following chapters—such as the incitement to communicate about feelings in situations where children are not receiving counselling at their own volition; the problem of drawing out therapeutic concerns from children's often tangential talk; or the means of responding to children's resistance to discussing therapeutic matters—are themselves generic to child counselling practice (and perhaps to counselling more generally). It is to be hoped, therefore, that my observations provide insights and resources that are useful for the varying audiences who may decide to read this book: from child counsellors themselves, to other social scientists interested in the nature of counselling discourse, to, perhaps, parents and others who may simply be interested in what kinds of things actually go on inside the child counselling office.

Ian Hutchby

Transcription conventions

Transcripts of naturally-occurring child counselling dialogues appear in these pages using the standard conventions of conversation analysis. (All names, place references and other such items have been altered to preserve anonymity.) The main aim of these symbols is to provide a sense, in written transcription, of how a stretch of talk 'sounds' on the tape. The main features foregrounded in the symbology are therefore the organisation of turns, including overlapping or interruptive talk, and features related to prosody and enunciation such as stress, emphasis, pauses, audible breathing, loudness or quietness. More detailed information on data and transcription is provided in Chapter 2. A formal account can be found in Chapter 3 of *Conversation Analysis* by Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt (Polity 1998).

Glossary of transcript symbols

- (0.5) Numbers in brackets indicate a gap timed in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a 'micropause' of less than one tenth of a second.
- = Equals signs are used to indicate 'latching' or absolutely no discernible gap between utterances; or to show the continuation of a speaker's utterance across intervening lines of transcript.
- [] Square brackets indicate the points where overlapping talk starts (left bracket) and ends (right bracket). Although the start of an overlap is always marked, the end is only sometimes marked.
- [[Double left square brackets indicate turns that start simultaneously.
- (()) Double brackets are used to describe a non-verbal activity: for example ((banging sound)). They are also used to enclose the transcriber's comments on contextual or other relevant features.
- () Empty brackets indicate the presence of an unclear utterance or other sound on the tape.
- .hhh h's preceded by a dot are used to represent audible inward breathing. The more h's, the longer the breath.
- hhhh h's with no preceding dot are used in the same way to represent outward breathing.

huh	Laughter is transcribed using 'laugh tokens' which, as far as the
heh	transcriber is able, represent the individual sounds that speakers
hih	make while laughing.
sou:::nd	Colons indicate the stretching of a sound or a word. The more colons
	the greater the extent of the stretching.
sou-	A dash indicates a word suddenly cut-off during an utterance.
.	Punctuation marks are not used grammatically, but to indicate
,	prosodic aspects of the talk. A full stop indicates a falling
?	tone; commas indicate fall-rise or rise-fall (i.e. a 'continuing'
↑↓	tone); question marks indicate a marked rising tone.
	Upward and downward arrows are used to mark an overall rise or
<u>a</u> :	fall in pitch across a phrase.
	Underlining of a letter before a colon indicates a small drop in pitch
<u>a</u> :	during a word.
	Underlining of a colon after a letter indicates a small rise in pitch at
<u>Underline</u>	that point in the word.
	Other underlining indicates speaker emphasis. Words may be
CAPITALS	underlined either in part or in full, depending on the enunciation.
→	Capitals mark a section of speech markedly louder than that
	surrounding it.
→	Arrows in the left margin point to specific parts of the transcript
° °	discussed in the text.
	Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk between them is
< >	noticeably quieter than surrounding talk.
	Outward chevrons are used to indicate that the talk between them
	is
	noticeably slower than surrounding talk.
> <	Inner chevrons are used to indicate that the talk between them is
	noticeably quicker than surrounding talk.

Supplementary note on the presentation of data

When preparing the manuscript for this book, I gave a lot of consideration to the question of how to describe the key participants in the data—that is, child counsellors and young children—and especially how to represent them as speakers in the data extracts that are scattered throughout these pages. Should I describe and represent them simply as ‘child’ and ‘counsellor’? Or even more neutrally, simply as ‘A’ and ‘B’? Or should I use the anonymised names I gave them for my own records, which would at least give the reader an indication of their respective gender? Or should I use a combination of names and, for the children at least, ages?

I quickly ruled out the ‘A’ and ‘B’ option, for the simple reason that in almost any conceivable situation of talk-in-interaction, and especially in institutional settings, we do not encounter one another as anonymous ‘A’s and ‘B’s. In certain quarters there is an argument that this is, in fact, the best way of representing participants for the purpose of analysis, since it avoids imputing any a priori identity characteristics that may not accord with the identities that are relevant, moment by moment, to the participants themselves. Such a position would therefore rule out my other options. For instance, to use the terms ‘Counsellor’ and ‘Child’ or ‘Counsellor, 35’ and ‘Child, 7’ might be taken to imply that these are fixed and concrete identity categories in terms of which the participants consistently orient to one another. Yet while this would, it is true, be an incorrect assumption (many other identities can become relevant and be demonstrably oriented to in the course of interaction) it seems equally true that the participants do not simply encounter one another as anonymous entities in a blank space, like characters in a Samuel Beckett play.

Therefore, in the interests of finding some balance between these positions, I adopted the policy of referring to participants in data extracts using single letters, but ones that both (a) indicated primary identity characteristics that were relevant—oriented to—by the participants themselves (even if not in every single utterance or action) and (b) provided a small amount of interpretive information (i.e. more than would be offered by ‘A’ and ‘B’) that could be useful for the readers of my analysis. Counsellors are referred to in all data extracts as ‘C’. Where it seems relevant to index their gender, that is mentioned in the text surrounding the extract. Children are referred to using the first letter of the Christian names I invented for each of them. The main names used, and their ages at the time of the

recordings, are Graham (4), Ben (5), Peter (6), Jenny (8), Dan (8), Pamela (10) and Amanda (12).

Thus, the following example is an exchange between a Counsellor and the child anonymised as Peter:

- 1 C: Are you surprised they said you couldn't go.
- 2 P: Yeah,
- 3 C: You are.
- 4 P: Mm.

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Child counselling and children's social competence

This book explores the interactional organisation of child counselling. Its specific focus is on a type of counselling for young children experiencing family break-up: that is, parental separation or divorce. Family break-up has long existed as a social phenomenon, and its increasing prevalence in western culture has been recognised since at least the middle of the 20th century. But it is only comparatively recently that children's views about and responses to parental separation have come to be treated seriously enough to warrant investment in specialist child counselling services. Many such services now operate on a self-referral or 'walk-in' basis with offices situated in town and city high streets. Families experiencing break-up or other difficulties are invited to seek appointments simply by phoning or going along to the office. Therefore, the child counsellors working in such practices do not tend to deal with children exhibiting severe behavioural problems, who would more likely be referred to clinical psychologists, or at risk of harm, in which case the child would likely be assigned to social workers. Instead, they deal largely with children whose parents feel that some sort of help is needed in getting the child to come to terms with the decision they have made to separate. Thus, the children in this study have not been referred for counselling through a medical route but on a voluntary basis; although the volition is more usually that of the parents rather than the child—an issue which affects the counselling in certain ways as the following chapters will show.

The book is based on tape-recordings of the work of a London-based high street child counselling and family mediation practice. The counsellors had a particular way of working which involved three steps. First, children and their parent(s) were seen together in an initial assessment meeting at which the purpose and structure of the counselling was explained and any possible concerns were raised. In the second step, the child counselling itself took place. Here, importantly, children were seen on their own by the counsellor for between four and six sessions, a series which could stretch across two or three months. During these sessions, parents were required to wait in a separate room. Counsellors took no written notes during the sessions themselves (although, as described later, for the purpose of my research these sessions were tape-recorded with the participants' consent) and the content of their discussions was treated as confidential between counsellor and

child. Counsellors would write up their notes after each session had ended, and these notes would then inform discussions in the third step, which was to hold a concluding meeting where parents, children and counsellors would again be present. The aim of this meeting was for counsellor and child jointly to provide parents with feedback about concerns raised and suggestions for going forward resulting from the series of one-to-one sessions.

This way of working makes child counselling very different from family therapy—another widely practised form of counselling for relational and behavioural problems in families. In family therapy, the preference is usually for counsellors to see family members of different generations together. While in certain circumstances the parents may be seen individually, or the children may be seen without their parents, much family therapy tends to adopt a ‘systems’ approach in which family problems are treated as emerging from the systems of interpersonal relationships and ways of communicating that characterise individual families. Thus, the solution to the difficulties which have brought the family to counselling is treated as residing in changes to the family system, and various practices are utilised to involve all family members in recognising and adopting those changes (see, for example, Boscolo et al. 1986).

By contrast, in the form of child counselling that is the subject of this book, the focus is entirely upon the child or children of the family. Indeed, in the course of my exploratory discussions about the research with practitioners, the view was often expressed that the counselling session represented ‘the child’s space’: a confidential environment in which children were enabled to speak in whatever way they pleased without worrying about possible repercussions from their parents. This even led some counsellors to decline their participation in the study I was undertaking. For these counsellors, my request to be allowed to tape-record sessions constituted a breach of confidentiality¹ and an incursion into the child’s space which they felt they could not warrant. In child counselling, therefore, a different (though possibly related) model seems to operate, in which it is felt primarily important to attain understanding of the child’s own view of whether they experience any difficulties associated with their parents’ separation, and if so, what those difficulties are and—perhaps most crucially—what the child him or herself feels are the most appropriate solutions to those difficulties.

As we will see, this means that child counselling discourse takes particular, and often quite unusual, forms. Counsellors appear to have fairly clear ideas about the kind of talk—or the kinds of topics—that they are aiming for. Thus, their interac-

1. This was so even though during the consent process confidentiality agreements were signed which ensured that neither parents nor counsellors would have access to the tapes or transcripts.

tions with children tend to be scattered with references to 'muddles' or 'jumbles'; to the child's 'anger', 'sadness' or 'confusion'; or to the child's ideas as to 'why' their parents do or say the things they do. Children, on the other hand, have a much less clear-cut sense of how to approach the talk of the counselling session. While they may be happy to talk at length about everyday affairs—the 'small talk' with which counsellors often open up sessions—they become far more taciturn when it comes to discussing family 'problems'. Indeed, children very rarely volunteer any information about their 'concerns'; and given that child counselling is, ostensibly, about addressing precisely such concerns, it falls to counsellors to find ways of trying to draw them out as the session unfolds.

In the light of these matters, then, the book can be said to address the following core analytical topics:

- The techniques by which counsellors draw out children's concerns about family trauma.
- The resources children use to make sense of their experience in the light of counsellors' questions.
- The discursive means by which children are situated as therapeutic subjects.
- The means by which children, through talking and avoiding talking, cooperate in or resist their therapeutic subjectification.

The approach I take to these topics is a sociological and linguistic one, building on the work of ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel 1967) and conversation analysts (Sacks 1992) who, since the 1960s, have encouraged social scientists to take naturally occurring dialogues as topics of analysis in their own right. In the domain of counselling research, Peräkylä (1995) and Silverman (1996) earlier adopted this approach to investigate HIV counselling for adults, showing how a close examination of talk and its organisation can provide valuable insights into the kinds of strategies used by counsellors to help clients make sense of, and find ways of dealing with, problematic or extraordinary situations. Silverman (1996) in particular was concerned to argue that such an approach should not be seen simply as a 'nit-picking' obsession with the micro-details of talk, but instead feeds into key sociological concerns with the role of institutional practices in contemporary everyday life and with the significance of discourse as a principal means of mediating social relations.

As Silverman (1996: 208) remarks, the essence of counselling is that each centre, or service, 'offers an institutionalised incitement to speak according to its own practical theories'. In order to see how that incitement to speak operates in practice, it is necessary to examine the details of actual talk produced during the course of counselling interaction. Accordingly, audio recordings of sessions were made with the consent of children (whose names and points of reference have been anonymised)

and their parents. Negotiation of consent was organised during the initial assessment meetings (see Chapter 3 for further details). A series of sessions (usually the full series) was captured for each case for which consent was granted. The cases involve children ranging from 4 to 12 years old, and include sessions conducted by both male and female counsellors. Additionally, the cases include single children and siblings, both male-male and male-female. In the latter cases, there are examples of siblings seen both together and separately.

The tapes were transcribed and analyzed according to the procedures of conversation analysis, or CA (see Chapter 2). CA treats talk within social interaction both as highly socially organised, and as a means of producing social organisation (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998). As a method, it focuses on the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction, and investigates how turn-taking is involved in the collaborative production of intersubjectivity along with other key elements of human sociality. As we see in more detail in Chapter 2, CA not only takes a distinctive perspective on the nature of talk-in-interaction as a collaboratively achieved, socially organised practice, but also on the nature of the specialised or ‘institutional’ settings in which a significant amount of talk takes place (Drew and Heritage 1992). Such settings range from courts of law (Atkinson and Drew 1979) to classrooms (Mehan 1979), from radio and television studios (Hutchby 1996, 2006) to doctors’ surgeries (Heath 1992), and include the self-referral child counselling services that are the subject matter of this book.

Following this method, the questions I address concerning the operation of given counselling techniques or the nature of children’s experiences of parental separation are all tied closely, and explicitly, to the observable production of talk during the session. Where questions of the efficacy of counselling talk arise, therefore, they do so in relation to how far the counsellor can be seen to succeed in eliciting from the child talk about their experiences of home or parental matters. Where questions arise about such experiences from the child’s perspective, they do so in relation to how children mediate their experiences through talk. Where children are invited to mediate their feelings through other means such as drawing or game playing, as often recommended in the child counselling literature, my focus is on how interpretations of such materials are drawn out interactionally within the real-time unfolding of talk between counsellor and child.

Before proceeding to a more detailed account of this methodological standpoint, it is important to fill in some of the broader conceptual and theoretical background in terms of which the book should be understood. First of all I will provide a consideration of relevant developments in the sociology of childhood and the cross-disciplinary analysis of children’s talk. Subsequently I will discuss related issues such as the relationship between children’s social competence and institutional arenas for talk and interaction, of which child counselling is one example.