

Talk in slow motion

Ian Florance talks to Elizabeth Stokoe, Professor of Social Interaction

I recently realised that we had hardly featured social psychologists in the 'Careers' section of *The Psychologist* and I have to thank Chris Walton, press officer of the Social Psychology Section, for putting me in touch with a number of potential interviewees. We meet two of them based at Loughborough University this month, beginning with Elizabeth Stokoe, Professor of Social Interaction in the Department of Social Sciences. Liz became a Chartered Psychologist in 2000, and in 2011 received the British Psychological Society Social Psychology

Section's Mid-Career Award ('It was a real surprise. I nearly didn't open the e-mail – I thought it was a circular. I see it as an award for discursive psychology').

Most of the staff of Loughborough University had decamped to the Olympics where, no doubt, they were watching former students competing. Universities, like hospitals, are a challenge to get around and, this was made worse by extensive building work. Liz's first words when I got to her office were 'I'm not that interesting'. We'll see.

On Pontins Southport, *Cracker* and feminist crime fiction

'I was taking science A-levels but I dropped physics in favour of psychology because I was pretty bad at physics. I originally intended to do combined maths and psychology at what was then Preston Poly (now the University of Central Lancashire), but when I arrived the maths part hadn't registered so I ended up on a straight psychology course.' It's clear from the way Liz talks that she didn't enjoy her degree. 'I didn't really have the traditional "university experience" for various reasons; I spent the first week living in Pontins Southport, for instance. And psychology didn't impact on me in a big way at that stage.'

In her second year Liz got a job at a bookshop in Hay-on-Wye ('I was very bookish') and thought about going into publishing. But she says that a one-week internship at Hodder and Stoughton was 'enough to convince me, fascinating

though that world was, I wasn't the Bridget Jones type. I had a place on the publishing master's at Oxford Brookes and then thought about specialising in forensic psychology: I suppose that was the time when *Cracker* was influencing a whole generation. I had a place on the master's at Leicester, but no funding. So basically I applied for anything in *The Guardian* with "psychology" in the advert, which generated an interview at Reading to do a PhD related to airport security. But the clincher was meeting Eunice Fisher at Nene College (now Northampton University), where we bonded over a shared love for feminist crime fiction and a shared birthday. Eunice was in the last three years of her career setting up a degree programme and the college had lots of funding for PhDs, as part of its quest for university status. She was interested in university classroom education so my PhD was centred on that at a time when the whole emphasis was on students learning from each other, but studied in school classrooms. I videoed tutorials and used conversation analysis, looking at issues like topic initiation, academic identity and the relevance of gender, work that continued in the five years after that at University of Derby and University College Worcester. I owe a lot to Eunice and to Derek Edwards, a colleague at Loughborough. At the time Nene College couldn't accredit PhDs so Derek was my external supervisor and it was through him in particular that I grew interested in conversation analysis.'

What I look at is 'the world as it happens'

Sociologists developed conversation analysis (CA) in the 1960s and '70s out of Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. It is used in a number of disciplines to study social interaction and focuses on the turn-by-turn unfolding of talk and how actions like greeting, offering, assessing, flirting and complaining are accomplished. The method collects data in the form of video or audio recordings of naturally occurring



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conversations, transcribing them using a technical method that attends to the way talk is delivered. The researchers then look to find recurring, normative patterns in interaction.

'Chomsky considered everyday speech was too messy to study. In fact, you find that day-to-day conversation is highly organised. Interestingly one of the best ways I've found to teach CA is to look at and analyse American sit-coms like *Friends* which display some of the basic structures underlying social interaction by breaking them, to humorous effect.'

I asked Liz how the methodology she's outlined differs from how she sees other approaches. 'Psychologists often create the encounters and activities that they study. As we'll discuss I've worked on neighbour relationships. A psychologist might ask neighbours to fill in a questionnaire or interview them about their experiences and reduce answers to either numbers or some kind of qualitative "theme". What I look at – the interaction – is happening elsewhere, beyond the research setting. If you want to find out what's happening in a police interrogation, another area I've studied, you record and analyse a police interrogation rather than asking the participants before or afterwards what they thought or felt about it. In the latter case you get accounts of the interaction, maybe, but the actual interrogation remains something of a black box. In a way I'm returning to my interest in physics – interaction drives social life and we're trying to describe it scientifically.'

Perhaps it's the way I've posed questions but you seem to be distinguishing yourself from social psychology. 'I've taught psychology for nearly 20 years and I'm about to start teaching forensic psychology. But one of the reasons I've felt at home in this department since I joined it in 2002 is that it doesn't force you into a particular disciplinary self-identity. It allows you to follow your thought and work where it leads. Certainly there are plenty of social psychologists who would describe themselves as scientific and some would offer criticisms of the methodologies we use, assuming we're the same as "qualitative" psychology. It can be quite a heated area. Neither Mick Billig [see over] nor I are typical social psychologists, though Mick has a greater experimental grounding in the area.'

Liz particularly wanted to work at Loughborough. 'Derby was a great place for a first job but I was travelling a long way back to my home in Hay-on-Wye at weekends. At Worcester I had a very heavy teaching load and little time to

publish. I love all aspects of university life – teaching, writing, researching – but what I really love is analysing interaction. My colleagues in the Discourse And Rhetoric Group (DARG), as well as colleagues across the Department in sociology, communication and media studies, criminology and social policy, make for sympathetic and interdisciplinary environment for what I do.'

Role play and real life

Before meeting Liz I'd read a large amount about her 'Conversation Analytic Role-play Method' (CARM), a project that seems central to her work at the moment. 'Derek and I won a research grant to study neighbour disputes, something no one had really looked at before. Our aim was to uncover what caused neighbours' disputes and how different organisations dealt with them. We gathered about 120 hours of conversation involving neighbours, police, mediation centres and council officers. As we analysed the data I got interested in the way people answering the calls, staff at mediation centres for instance, responded. Where, in the conversation with a mediation centre, did the person reporting a nuisance neighbour lose interest in the mediation on offer? What convinced them to use the centre to solve the problem? What strategies did staff use to cope with, for instance, the suggestion of racist attitudes? Looking at topics like this suggested that, based on our material and work, I thought I might be able to train people like mediators to interact better with callers and clients.'

This touches on a wider issue. Role play is used to train 'communication' skills just about everywhere such training is offered, from the police and media to commercial executives. 'How authentic is role play? There's very little work on this. In fact a lot of communication training is based on someone's theory-driven idea of what might work, rather than on how people in different settings actually interact. Most obviously there are different things at stake in role play than in the actual situation and this impacts on the kinds of things people do, and how they do them. For example, an actor playing a suspect does quite different things to a real suspect.' CARM is now the basis for dozens of ESRC-funded workshops which Liz has run across the UK, Ireland and US.

How does CARM work? 'I play workshop participants an extract from an actual interaction, alongside the anonymised transcript. I was worried that

people would find the transcription difficult to understand, but they pick up the basic vocabulary very quickly. But the key is that the workshop participants experience the interaction in real time then discuss how they might react. We then watch the next stage of the conversation – how the actual mediator, or police officer, responded – and discuss and evaluate it, and so on. We're working with real, not simulated data, as the basis for generating strategies for good practice.'

This is a simplified description of the process but as Liz plays me a sound file with the transcription alongside it I begin to start thinking of application areas: sales training; counselling and coaching; mediation in legal disputes. Why not UN negotiators?

'I'm already getting involved with family mediators and other academics are interested in using CARM in their own work. Yes, there are many applications but I'm having to think long and hard about capacity and the difficulty of getting recordings of data in certain situations. Commercial organisations can be secretive about how they work, and I doubt whether we'd get permission to record real negotiations between opposing factions in a bitter civil war.'

I ask Liz if this method only applies to spoken communication. 'I'm working with Frederick Attenborough, Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies here at Loughborough, looking at leaflets, posters and letters produced by mediation services. His core interest is text.'

'I really feel at home'

Our time is almost up and Liz offers to give me a lift to the station. As we drive through Loughborough she reiterates, 'I really feel at home here in the Social Science Department. There's a freedom to think and to work across boundaries without worrying what discipline you ostensibly belong to.'

What strikes me about Liz's work – and CARM is a good example – is that many techniques I've come across are used without any real understanding of whether they work and, if so, how. For instance, a lot of business training seems to be based on the idea that if you throw enough learning opportunities at someone, something will stick. The extraordinarily detailed work of conversation analysis begins to cast a light on interactive issues happening outside the 'frame' of other research methods.

To respond to Liz's first comment, I found her conversation fascinating.

'I've just followed what interested me at the time'

Ian Florance meets **Mick Billig**, Professor of Social Science at Loughborough University

The interview was held. The findings were that the interviewee (let's call him/her 'X') could be described as an academic social scientist (though an in-person replication of the interview is advised to confirm this finding). It was observed that a number of books were authored, though original authorship is an unusually imprecise conceptualisation given the ubiquity of influence and citation in academic writing and the insights of post modern conceptions of authorship. More work is necessary.'

Or to put it another way, I've just interviewed Mick Billig, Professor of Social Science at Loughborough University, and I'm trying to avoid writing in the style of that first paragraph. I believe George Orwell's great essay *Politics and the English Language* is the best available guide to writing clear precise language. I'd heard that Mick shared this view and was even writing a book on bad writing in the social sciences. This would put any interviewer on his or her mettle.

The first area of psychology I enjoyed studying

Given that questions of identity loom large in Mick's fascinating book *Banal Nationalism* I started by asking him whether he described himself as a social psychologist. 'I'm an academic and a social scientist. I have a background in social psychology and describe myself as a social psychologist in certain contexts, but I don't tend to think about what I am or how my work should be classified – I prefer just to do it.'

Mick grew up in Wandsworth and Putney ('It was a fairly ordinary upbringing'), then went to Bristol to study psychology and philosophy. What fascinated him about psychology? 'Nothing at first. I didn't want to follow up any of my A-level subjects and it was philosophy that changed my life. We studied it historically and concentrated on thinkers like Locke, Hume, Berkeley and Descartes. Philosophy and psychology asked similar questions but philosophy gave richer answers, so my psychology undergraduate work always had a philosophical bias, which didn't go down that well.' Half way through his third year his life changed. 'Henri Tajfel, one of the greatest social psychologists, joined as professor. I wrote an essay on cognitive dissonance and his comment was "You

should study social psychology". I found that that was the first area of psychology I enjoyed studying. I must pay tribute to Henri, who helped and encouraged me in so many ways. He organised a part-time assistant research post for me and I acted as his research assistant.'

'During the summer after I graduated, Henri asked me to design an experiment based around the question "If you put a person in a meaningless group would they come to identify with it?" It was the first minimal group experiment and I enjoyed designing and running it. Extending it was the basis for my PhD.' Even at this stage Mick was still taking a philosophical approach. 'One of the chapters in my PhD looked at Locke's and Wittgenstein's approach to classification. Before the viva Henri asked me "What would you say if the external examiner asked what was the point of that chapter?" I said that I'd reply by asking what was the point of the other chapters. Henri laughed and said that would be a good answer.'

I've never really understood academic language

Mick thought about working as a schoolteacher after finishing his PhD, but the idea of becoming an academic grew on him, though not a standard experimental and academic psychologist. 'It took me years to admit this, but I've never really understood academic language. Other people seem to be able to read technical papers easily – I have to translate them into simpler language to grasp what is being said. The process sometimes shows that the author isn't actually saying very much! This led to some rather embarrassing job interviews.'

Mick worked for 12 years as a Lecturer in Psychology at Birmingham. 'I had very good friends in the department and it was a great place, but I felt intellectually isolated. I didn't go to conferences and had few connections outside the university. I couldn't



structure my thoughts or express them in the specific way academic journals require. So, to put it positively, I did my teaching work and was then free to do the things I wanted. I wrote a couple of books, and that has been a continuing theme in my life – getting fascinated by a topic and writing books about them.'

I suggest Mick's writing also emerges certain themes, most particularly nationalism and language. His early books included studies of the National Front and the way families talk about the Royal Family and then his award winning *Banal Nationalism*. He's also written on how rhetoric shapes thinking and also on rhetoric's influence on the unconscious. 'Yes, ideology and language are continuing threads in what I've written but I've not had a conscious plan – I've just followed what interested me at the time.'

Mick describes the Social Science Department at Loughborough as 'a home

for me. There's less of that insecurity and pressure that you feel sometimes in psychology departments. I feel freer in the Social Science Department, which doesn't force you to think about what you are and what your discipline is. It encourages you to follow your thoughts.'

Crossing boundaries

According to a web description The Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG) started meeting in Mick's office in 1987, not as a 'formal research centre... [but] primarily as a vehicle for generating discussion at the intersection of a number of interests in discourse, rhetoric, activity and conversation'. Mick gives a fuller explanation. 'The idea for DARG came initially from Derek Edwards, another social psychologist. He was interested in social interaction and he knew that I was interested in classical rhetoric. It was originally very informal but it's changed. We've got much better facilities and have had some academic success, especially in attracting postgraduates, but this has inevitably changed the nature of the group. Informal groups like this often develop more formal structures as they grow.' DARG seems to me to be an example of the type of thing that develops when people from different disciplines get together and seek to cross conventional academic structures. I've just read Andrew Pickering's *The Cybernetic Brain*, which describes how early British pioneers of robotics and AI developed similar informal groupings, outside academic structures, to advance their thinking.

In recent years, Mick has returned to the subject of language in the social sciences. 'Much academic language really is a foreign language to me, so I'm like an English person abroad - I use my own language but speak louder!' His recently completed book, *Bad Writing and the Social Sciences: Big Words in Small Circles*, opens with a description of Mick reading authors as diverse as Orwell, Hannah Arendt, CLR James and Freud. To quote from the first chapter: 'Despite their intellectual differences, Arendt, James and Freud share one thing in common: none was a professional academic, writing primarily for other academics. The academic terminology, which I could not master or take into myself as my own, seemed paltry by comparison to their words.' 'I expect when it gets published a lot of my academic

colleagues won't speak to me again, but I'm making serious points here. Conventional social science writing loses information. It uses bureaucratic language. Maybe it's fine to use passive verbs and to 'nominalise' verbs by turning them into long words ending in 'ification' or 'isation' in the natural sciences but in social sciences that style discards information. If you say "This was done" you're ignoring who did what to whom, which is pretty important in the social sciences. I argue that the customary noun-based writing used by academic social scientists and psychologists is imprecise. This has huge implications for universities and academics who have to publish in a certain form and style, through certain channels, to keep their jobs, to promote their discipline, their approach and their own careers. The line between writing to discover new insights and writing to market a person, a department or an approach is getting blurred. We should all be concerned about that.'

At a time when there is conversation and disagreement about psychologists' roles, focus and status, and about how academic performance is judged, it is important to pay attention to people who question received opinions in what they do, who go about their role as academic or psychologist in a different way. Mick constantly stresses his focus on following his thoughts. He gets interested in issues and then concentrates on doing something about this interest - researching, reading and writing.

Let me sum up what proved to be a fascinating interview by quoting again from the opening chapter of Mick's recently completed book:

I am not a young scholar, rebelling against the establishment, but I am approaching the end of my working life, having spent almost forty years in continuous employment as a university teacher. It has, for the most part, been a wonderful job. Not only has the work been relatively well remunerated, but it has been a privilege to be paid for reading and writing; and it has not been a hardship to teach bright, young people, some of whom have even been interested in the topics that I have taught. I cannot imagine a better way to earn a salary; but that may say more about my lack of imagination than it does about working as a modern academic in the social sciences.

Discuss, as an exam paper might say.



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