



INEQUALITY IN ACTION

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Abstract

This paper highlights some of the issues that arise when focusing on inequality (and similar notions) as participants' concerns. It emphasises the value of understanding constructions of inequality in terms of how they are (a) oriented to action; (b) situated (sequentially, institutionally, rhetorically); and (c) constructed from discursive resources and constructive of social and mental worlds. These points are illustrated with an example from a call to a child protection helpline. This illustrates how a particular description of inequality can be oriented to action, constructed and situated. This is the basis for some more general observations on the nature of inequality as an object in interaction.

Keywords: inequality, action orientation, situation, construction, conversation analysis, child protection helpline

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Introduction

One way of understanding social inequality (and similar notions) is to take an approach which starts (although does not necessarily finish) with the discursive practices of participants in particular settings. How is ‘inequality’, for instance, invoked as part of an action in a family, say? Such an approach has been developed within some traditions of discourse analysis, rhetoric, and discursive psychology (Billig, 1996; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), drawing on thinking in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992). This approach highlights three aspects of discourse: action orientation, situation, and construction. The next three points briefly say something about each.

1. Action orientation

Discourse is the primary medium of human action and interaction. Actions are typically embedded in broader practices. Some are generic (‘complaining’); some are specific to settings (‘requesting a bank overdraft facility’). The idea of action *orientation* discourages the expectation that analysis will discover a one-to-one relation where discrete acts are performed by discrete verbs. Starting with action encourages one to think about the ways in which constructions of ‘inequality’ can be used to do things.

2. Situation

Discourse is situated in three senses. First, it is organized sequentially, such that the primary environment of what is said is what has just come before, and this sets up (although does not determine) what comes next. Second, discourse may be situated institutionally, such that institutional identities (social worker, say) and tasks (managing neutrality with respect to different clients) may be relevant to (although not determine) what takes place. Third, discourse can be situated rhetorically, such that descriptions may resist actual or potential attempts to counter them as interested. A spouse’s construction of their problems in a relationship counselling session may be designed to counter their partner’s version.

3. Construction

Discourse is *constructed* and *constructive*. It is *constructed* in the sense that it is built from various resources (words, of course, but also categories, commonplace ideas, interpretative repertoires, broader explanatory systems). It is *constructive* in the sense that versions of the world, of events and actions, and

of people's phenomenological worlds are built and stabilized in talk in the course of actions. A person may account for missing a meeting by offering a version of the city's traffic problems, or of their own faulty mental processes. The form of construction here is distinct from some other varieties of social constructionism. It is focused on the constructions of participants in their talk and texts. The focus is therefore on *specific* descriptions or conversations, and what they are being used to do. It appreciates the enormous sophistication of people as world constructors, and the elaborate set of resources that they have available for building constructions, as well as the further set of resources that can be used to tear them down (Billig, 1996; Potter, 1996).

This approach cuts across the traditional individual/social (psychology/sociology) dualism, as well as the traditional micro/macro division. It does this through its focus on the way both psychology and society are 'produced' (described, invoked, categorized) for action and interaction. This is an inversion of the traditional explanatory mode in social science where action is explained by reference to inner psychological entities (attitudes, motives) or broader social processes (group allegiance, persuasion). Here the focus is on what people are doing (actions, as parts of practices in settings) and how versions of mind or the social world are drawn on (using a mix of somewhat bespoke and somewhat off-the-shelf discursive resources) to serve these actions (Potter, 1996; Wetherell, 1998). People describe the world, formulating particulars that are relevant, simultaneously describing its social organization, providing its moral flavour and highlighting its causal power; and people describe cognition, formulating an inner life of beliefs, motives and feelings that make their actions accountable.

There have been a range of studies of inequality using a discourse approach of this kind over the past 20 years. Some studies have focused on constructions of gender, social class and employment (Billig, 1993; Gill, 1993; Riley, 2002; Wetherell, et al., 1987); others have considered issues of inequality and affirmative action (Potter & Wetherell, 1989; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005) particularly in the context of racism (Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley, 1999; Edwards, 2004; Tileagă, 2005, 2006; Verkuyten, 1998, 2001, 2003; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Much of this work is based on open ended interviews and drawn on discourse analytic notions such as interpretative repertoires (Potter et al., 1990) and ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). Important and influential though this work is, there are limits to what can be

achieved when working with interview materials (see Potter & Hepburn, in press, for reasons why) and more recent work has started to focus on materials derived from natural settings. This change of focus has led discourse researchers to draw more on the analytic perspective of conversation analysis (Wooffitt, 2005). We are not here going to spend much time reviewing earlier work – (for that see Hepburn, 2003; Speer, 2005 and Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001a,b). Our current paper has two main aims. First, it will illustrate the operation of the action-situation-construction scheme outlined above with a particular extract. Second, it will highlight the complexity and specificity of addressing inequality as an interactional object.

Inequality in an institutional setting

The example comes from a project that is studying the work of the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's child protection helpline (see Hepburn, 2004; Hepburn, 2005; Hepburn & Potter, 2004; Potter & Hepburn, 2003, 2005). The helpline receives more than a quarter of a million calls a year and provides information, advice and counselling to anyone concerned about a child's safety. The focus has been on studying the way the calls are organized with the analytic aim of explicating issues about activity, mind and description and the practical aim of supporting the training and effectiveness of the helpline. All the Child Protection Officers who take calls on the helpline have three years field social work experience. One of its principal roles is to refer information about abuse to the relevant social services departments.

How should one look for 'inequality' in this helpline? One of the radical issues that confronts researchers in moving to look at participants' orientations, or members' concerns, or people's own categories is that they are unlikely to map onto our social science categories in any clear-cut way. Inequality is part of the language of social theory but much less a part of everyday and institutional interaction. For example, a search through all of the files on one of our PCs containing a career's worth of writing and several data archives on (including transcripts of more than 250 NSPCC calls) finds 170 instances of the term 'inequality', but *not a single one* of these comes from a data file. There is a highly unequal distribution of 'inequality'! However, the weakness of focusing on members' concerns is that it can pull the focus of

research away from the very real and important issues that stimulate research on such topics. The strength of focusing on members' concerns is that it can lead to novel understandings of actions, events and what is important. Nevertheless, it is interesting for this exercise to look for an example that links to traditional ideas about inequality. The extract that follows was chosen because the CPO invokes a category of being 'on benefits'. From a classic sociological account this would be a category of people who are poor, disadvantaged, perhaps an 'underclass'. The analysis will focus on precisely how this description is used and what it might be doing within this institutional setting. It can be an object to discipline reflection on analysis and theory.

The segment below starts from early in the call, immediately after the caller has agreed to take part in the study. It reproduces the opening minutes of a 12 minute call to give readers a feel of how such a call unfolds (see appendix for transcription conventions).

WO neighbour concern

- 1 **CPO:** =↑How can I help.
2 **Caller:** Hhh right (0.2) .hh ↑u:m:
3 a-a'm u:m:: (0.7) jus-just a
4 neighbour an I wa:lk ma dog an a'm
5 .hh actually s:ick an tired(.)
6 .hh (0.2) of the: (0.3) er:
7 verbal abuse that I 'ear when
8 a walk past the house.
9 (0.2)
10 **Caller:** .hh[h that] a mum is givin
11 **CPO:** [Right.]
12 **Caller:** to 'er kids.
13 (0.2)
14 .hh[h]
15 **CPO:** [R]ight,=
16 **Caller:** =An a've actually ↑stood beyind 'er in a (.) .hh
17 (0.2) ↑local shop an
18 see:n .h (0.2) what she fee:ds the
19 children an a think it's disgus:tin.
20 **CPO:** Okay., (0.2)
21 **Caller:** Yeh=
22 **CPO:** =D'ye wanna tell me a little bit
23 about what-what's goin on?

- 24 **Caller:** WELL EVery time you walk past she is
 25 EFF: in an BLI:N:din an carry on.
 26 **CPO:** Right,=
 27 **Caller:** =The hou:se is absolu:tely: (0.2)
 28 filthy I've seen the door open.
 29 **CPO:** Right,
 30 **Caller:** Ye know, (0.3) an a mean: er::
 31 (0.6) kids are kids:.
 32 (0.3)
 33 **CPO:** M[hm: .]
 34 **Caller:** [Ye kn]ow, (.) .hh (0.2) a:m::
 35 an i-it's got to the stage where
 36 a-a'm ↑'avin to walk me dog a different
 37 way cos a'm getting really upset
 38 o:[ver it.]
 39 **CPO:** [M m]:.
 40 (0.2)
 41 Mm[:.]
 42 **Caller:** [Ye] know .hh (.) an a mean a've
 43 seen 'er .hh (.) in the shop on a tea
 44 time (0.2) .hh buyin for the children's
 45 tea >an a mean< she's (0.2) .hh she's
 46 three(.) .hh (0.4) chubby ki:ds.
 47 **CPO:** Mm.
 48 (0.3)
 49 **Caller:** But (0.2) to me what they're fed is:
 50 (0.3) is all wrong.
 51 **CPO:** Right.=what've you see 'er buy:in then.
 52 **Caller:** WELL ER:m:: (.) a pack of eight sausages.
 53 **CPO:** Mm[: ,]
 54 **Caller:** [An a] bag of fro:zen chips.
 55 (0.3)
 56 **CPO:** Mm:.,
 57 (0.4)
 58 **Caller:** Ye know.
 59 (0.4)
 60 Er::m an a loa:fa bread >an a mean she<
 61 shops daily.
 62 **CPO:** Mm. N-w- some people do do: that.=don't
 63 they.=>a [m'n< i-]i- ye know is she on
 64 **Caller:** [Yeh.]
 65 **CPO:** benefi:ts.=cos that-that's not unusual
 66 if [somebody's on benefits yeah]

67 **Caller:** [Ye:s, she's on benefits, but] er::
68 (0.5) she's got somebody else livin
69 with her?
70 **CPO:** Ri:ght (.) [Right.]

A series of observations about this material are offered. These are by no means exhaustive. The first two are general.

First, *it is naturalistic*. In contrast to the vast majority of work in social sciences (including much ethnography) it uses material that is taken from an actual setting. It would have occurred in more or less this way if the researcher had not been interested in the material. We have called it *naturalistic* (rather than natural) in recognition of the potential for 'reactivity' in such records - (Speer, 2002). Nevertheless, this situation is not flooded by categories introduced by the social researcher; nor are the participants speaking on the basis of identities pre-defined by the researcher (Edwards & Stokoe, 2005; Potter & Hepburn, in press).

Second, *it uses transcript to capture features of speech delivery*. In contrast to the majority of interview based research and ethnographic work the transcript uses conventions (developed by Gail Jefferson – e.g. Jefferson, 1985) that are designed to capture features of speech delivery that are consequential for interaction. Overlap, delay, emphasis and various intonational contours are part of what gives talk its specific character. To wipe out such elements by turning it into playscript can lose elements that are crucial to participants and potentially important aids to analysis. The attempt to capture these elements is an attempt to capture the lived and embodied texture of talk.

Inequality as an interactional object

The next three points are specific to the study and understanding of 'inequality'.

First, one needs to be aware at the *potential inequalities between the speakers*. One can study inequalities between caller and CPO. There are a range of possibilities here – the Caller has called while the CPO has answered; the Caller is probably doing something unusual, the CPO is doing something they do all day every day; the Caller treats the CPO as knowing about child protection; the CPO treats the caller as knowing about this specific case. The

nature, consequences and perhaps reworking of these things is a topic of study. There is a wide body of work in conversation analysis that has studied inequalities of this kind [for institutional example, see papers in Drew & Heritage, 1992; for examples considering gender see Speer (2005), Stokoe & Weatherall (2002), Kitzinger (2005)].

Second, one needs to be able to describe how *speakers construct and invoke inequalities in their talk*. The focus on speaker's constructions of inequality/equality in their talk is something that has been a topic in discourse analysis and discursive psychology for 20 years (Wetherell, et al., 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The challenge now is to move these problematics forward when working with naturalistic materials. Before moving onto our third point, an example is discussed from a range of possible ones in the longer sequence. The focus is on the CPO's observations about 'benefits' on 62-66, and consider them in terms of the action-situation-construction scheme outlined above. Observations will be speculative and illustrative as the concern is with a single example rather than building the analysis by working with a collection. To suggest that someone is 'on benefits' is, loosely, to suggest that they are a recipient of state aid and therefore poor. They may be unemployed or working in a low income or part time occupation. In the abstract, then, it is a categorization for a range of disadvantaged groups in UK society. However, our discursive construction approach encourages us to look at the *specifics* of how this description is assembled and what it is doing.

Note that the CPO's turn from 62 to 66 is constructed from a series of elements that are delivered as a package. These can be teased out (lines renumbered for clarity of reference):

- | | | |
|---|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | CPO: | Mm. |
| 2 | | N-w- <u>some</u> people do do: that. |
| 3 | | =don't they.= |
| 4 | | >a [m'n< i-]i- |
| 5 | Caller: | [Yeh.] |
| 6 | CPO: | ye know |
| 7 | | is she on <u>benefi</u> :ts. |
| 8 | | =cos that-that's not <u>un</u> sual |
| 9 | | if [somebody's on benefits yeah] |

After the acknowledgement on line 1 the CPO suggests 'some people

do do that'. This is vague both in the reference of 'some people' (although presumably the mother described by the caller a candidate) and of 'that' (is it shopping daily, or buying sausages and chips, or both?). This vagueness of reference should not be seen as a shortcoming; systematic vagueness of this kind makes the construction particularly hard to disagree with (Edwards & Potter, 1992). It is rhetorically robust (Billig, 1996) and offered contrastively (compare 'they do that' with 'they do do that' as it is in line 2). This construction presents what 'some people' do as scripted or standardized; in Edwards' (1994, 1997) terms it is a 'script formulation'. Edwards notes the way that script formulations present actions as normal, standard or expected, and are often contrasted with dispositional formulations which present actions as a product of features of individuals (their personality, views or moral shortcomings). Script formulations are a basic tool used by people when constructing and stabilizing particular versions of social order.

This script formulation is followed by the tag question 'don't they' (line 3). This projects agreement and the latching means that it is delivered before the caller can easily offer a response, certainly one that starts a new turn. The 'yeh' in overlap provides the agreement that the tag question projects. The CPO continues 'rushing through' with the 'I mean' ('a m' n' – line 4) indicating further explication is to come and a 'you know'. Although items like 'you know' are often treated as empty fillers, conversation and discourse work has highlighted some of the roles they perform in interaction. For example, Edwards (1997) notes the way 'you know' can be a claim to shared knowledge between speaker and recipient. In this case, the CPO is offering the point about 'what people do' as something that both parties may already know. The CPO then asks the caller if the person she is calling about is on benefits (line 7). Although one might think of this as part of the information gathering task of the NSPCC in preparation for making a possible referral, there are good reasons to think that, at least in this case, it is operating rather differently. Note in particular the way that what comes next is latched, heading off an immediate answer. The CPO offers this as an account for the behaviour of the person being called about.

Third, one needs to consider that *constructions of inequality are part of actions*. What one can see here is that the CPO has developed the construction of the person being on benefits as an account for their behaviour. It offers a way of seeing the (claimed) behaviour of the mother as normal or standard for

people in that social category. More broadly this can be seen as part of the CPO testing the information in the call to establish whether it is appropriate for a referral. There is some delicacy here. One way of hearing the CPO's package here is as offering the possibility that the caller is displaying prejudices about someone who is economically disadvantaged. Presenting the mother's actions as normative for people on benefits has the potential for casting the caller's dispositional claims about abuse parenting as insensitive or prejudiced. However, it is a feature of institutional interaction of this kind that although there can be testing or claims there is a reluctance to move into explicit justifications or criticisms or other actions that invoke moral issues (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). It may well be that the tag questions and emphasis on shared knowledge may work against the explicit eruption of complaints or defences in the call.

More broadly still the patterning here can be seen as reflecting basic institutional and epistemic inequalities. Callers and CPOs are in different positions with respect to the events. Put simply, callers know about the persons and events they are calling about, CPOs know about child protection. It is a bit more complex, however. Note, that callers' knowledge of persons and events is not something assumed or simply present. After all, they could be imagining things, acting on the base of spite, or misunderstanding, or on general prejudices. For this reason, callers need to manage the epistemic basis of their claims. The caller here introduces a number of elements into the call that attend to epistemic issues. One element is the use of knowledge entitling categories such as 'neighbour' (line 4; see Potter, 1996). Another element is the reiterated walking of the dog (lines 4, 36-7). This is neat as it provides an appropriate basis for the caller having seen the problem behaviour. Walking the dog is both a regular activity (providing regular opportunity for observing) and one that you are required to do, so it counteracts ideas of nosiness or voyeurism. The caller's stance is explicitly managed on lines 36-7 with the caller's claim that she was being made upset. This does double duty in showing that she does not revel in other's misfortune – she is not a 'nosey neighbour' (Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005) – and the mistreatment of the children is sufficient to be upsetting, and therefore an appropriate basis for calling the NSPCC. Another element managing the caller's epistemics is what she can see and hear, for example, in the local shop or while walking past. This provides for the production of vivid detail (eight sausages, a pack of frozen chips) that further

supports the caller's membership of the knowledge entitling category 'witness' (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The CPO does not have these specific epistemic resources. She cannot (easily) say that the verbal abuse doesn't sound extreme or that the kids seem healthy enough. Instead, as we have seen she constructs her version using scripts and common knowledge. She deploys what 'everybody' knows about, for example, what poor people on benefits are like. This provides a basis for testing out the claims made by the caller in preparation for a possible referral. The general point here, then is that 'inequality' is invoked as part of the business of the institution.

Conclusion and discussion

What this paper has tried to do, briefly and schematically, is to indicate some of the ways in which inequality can be understood as participants' issue. The paper has considered the way inequality talk is constructed, situated and oriented to action. A similar argument could be made of course for notions such as equality, domination, exploitation and superiority. It has particularly tried to highlight how taking seriously the study of these notions as members' concerns requires us to take seriously the situated practices that they are embedded within. The paper ends with some broader observations.

First, it should be emphasised again that this paper is illustrative and speculative. It is the prelude to a full scale study of the uses of 'inequality' in this material. Such a study might provide a more systematic account of the practices in which inequality constructions are employed. Second, although the paper has started with the notion 'inequality', there can be problems in starting in this way. One of the virtues of working with naturalistic material is to avoid flooding what is going on with pre-theorized social science categories. To try nevertheless to introduce such categories at such an early stage in the research can defeat this purpose. Conversely, working with material like this and being open to features of its organization and content that are unexpected can be analytically productive. This does not mean that such analysis might not be done against a backdrop of concerns with issues such as inequality or exploitation. It can be interesting to perform such research with an interest in critical or political or emancipatory issues. However, there would be less of an attempt to impose such issues on the material at the start of the analysis. Third,

the analysis done here is non-cognitivist. The focus is on discursive constructions and practices which are understood in relation to actions. They are not treated as a consequence of inner states or objects. For example, we would not assume that either speaker in the material above has a particular, freestanding, mentally encoded representation of social inequality in general and being 'on benefits' in particular. Fourth, the relationship of this kind of research to classic social studies of inequality is complex. It certainly does not invalidate such studies. In part, what is signalled is a difference of emphasis. The kind of work discussed here considers inequality as a participants' concern, while traditional studies of inequality have attempted to focus on actual differences between, say, the incomes of different social groups. The latter work is undoubtedly crucial for those developing a critical agenda. Although to some extent these styles of work are merely different and complementary, there are issues where an understanding of inequality in action may raise question about the basis of more traditional measures. Could it be that certain technical constructions of inequality are artefacts or reconstructions of practices where inequality is invoked for particular purposes? We have not attempted to show this in our current analysis; however, work on experiments, surveys and focus groups shows how such work might proceed (Antaki, 1999; Antaki & Rapley, 1996; Edwards & Potter, 1993; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000, Puchta & Potter, 2002; Schegloff, 1999). Some might see the focus on members' concerns as a move to increasingly micro analysis. However, a close attention to situated practices will inevitably bring into focus issues of history, institutions, culture and asymmetries as these things are reworked and reproduced as parts of participants' practices. Explicating that, in that way, is the task of discursive constructionism.

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Appendix: Transcription Symbols

[] them	Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech. Position in alignment where the overlap occurs.
↑ ↓	Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement, over and above normal rhythms of speech.
Underlining	Signals vocal emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis, but also indicates how heavy it is.
CAPITALS	Mark speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech (often occurs when speakers are hearably competing for the floor, raised volume rather than doing contrastive emphasis).
°↑I know it,°	‘Degree’ signs enclose obviously quieter speech (i.e., hearably produced-as quieter, not just someone distant).
(0.4)	Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds (in this case, 4 tenths of a second). Place on new line if not assigned to a speaker.
(.)	A micropause, hearable but too short to sensibly measure.
she wa::nted	Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.
hhh	Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
.hhh	Inspiration (in-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
Yeh,	‘Continuation’ marker, speaker has not finished; marked by fall-rise or weak rising intonation, as when enunciating lists.
y’know?	Question marks signal stronger, ‘questioning’ intonation, irrespective of grammar.
Yeh.	Periods (full stops) mark falling, stopping intonation (‘final contour’), irrespective of grammar, and not necessarily followed by a pause.

bu-u-	hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound.
>he said<	'greater than' and 'lesser than' signs enclose speeded-up talk.
solid.=	'Equals' signs mark the immediate 'latching' of successive talk, whether of one
=We had heh heh	or more speakers, with no interval. Voiced laughter.
sto(h)p i(h)t	Laughter within speech is signalled by h's in round brackets.
uh um	noises such as 'er' and 'erm'.