

**Asymmetry in interaction on a men's relationship counselling
helpline: Managing the competing relevancies of troubles-telling
and service provision**

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Disclaimer

**The views expressed in this thesis are the researcher’s own and do not necessarily
reflect those of *MensLine Australia*.**

Abstract

The present thesis examines the nature of calls to an Australian men's relationship counselling helpline. The focus is on explicating how the helpline's institution-specific goals are played out, in practice, in sequences of interaction.

Men's help-seeking has become a popular topic of academic interest in recent years due to an apparent paradox: in the Western world, men experience greater morbidity and mortality than women, yet are reportedly less likely to seek help for health-related issues. When men *do* consult health professionals, it is argued that they display a characteristic masculine preference for action-oriented, solution-focused outcomes. To date, most studies describing such male preferences have been based on survey and interview data. Such methods do not provide detailed information about how help-seeking is routinely accomplished, *in situ*, in naturally-occurring interactions. The present research addresses this limitation by employing Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyse a corpus of 169 calls fielded by a men's counselling helpline.

Consistent with the mainstream literature on men's help-seeking, the helpline from which the data in this thesis was collected works from the framework of a solution-focused model of counselling. The helpline has two main aims in its over-the-phone interactions: (1) providing callers an opportunity to talk about their relationship problems, and (2) assisting callers with the development of practical coping strategies and solutions in respect of such problems. These institutional aims correspond to the relevant call-taker categories of troubles-recipient and service provider, respectively. In the CA literature, these categories are often viewed as separate and contradictory in that they orient to two different aspects of talk-in-interaction: whereas a troubles-telling is focused on the teller and his/her experience, a service-encounter is focused on the problem at hand, its properties, and ways to fix it. The

aim in this thesis was to explicate the skilled ways in which counsellors managed the competing relevancies of their dual institutional role in sequences of talk-in-interaction recorded from the helpline.

The analysis showed that when callers indicated that they had called the helpline for the explicit purpose of receiving advice, counsellors oriented to this type of account as a sufficient demonstration of accountability. By contrast, there were a number of interactional difficulties associated with the production of narrative reports on a trouble. These difficulties manifested in sequences of interaction where counsellors attempted to turn the reason-for-call from troubles-telling to service provision, and where callers routinely resisted these attempts. Through an examination of this resistance, a pattern of interactional asymmetry or difference in orientation between caller and counsellor to the purpose of calls taking place between them was described. Whereas the majority of callers appeared to call the helpline for the explicit purpose of ‘talking to’ someone, counsellors routinely oriented to the importance of service provision *as well as* troubles-receipting in their interactions with callers. This asymmetry arguably has important consequences for the pervasive assumption that men display a preference for solution-focused outcomes, and for the services shaped by this assumption. The implications of this observed pattern for research and institutional practice are discussed.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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