

Social Interaction in High Stakes Crisis Communication

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Highlights

1. The articles in the SI investigate communication during crises and emergencies.
2. They study events involve dispatchers, medics, police, soldiers, call-handlers.
3. They analyse practices that shape events and outcomes in crisis interaction.
4. They analyse hard-to-access audio and/or video recordings of real-life events.
5. The SI extends research in pragmatics on crisis and emergency interactions.

Abstract

The contributions to this special issue investigate rare, acute and hard-to-access interactions in situations of crisis, conflict and emergency. They study low frequency but high stakes communication between crisis-related professionals and citizens, or among professional parties themselves. The data used for the analysis are audio and/or video recordings of naturally occurring and real-life events, either actual crisis situations or training situations. The settings range from audio-only emergency telephone calls to complex multimodal training events, including police negotiations with suicidal persons, suicide helplines, police-lay people interactions, call/dispatch centres, mass casualty exercises, and United Nations crisis management training. By building on the background and principles of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA), the studies focus on live interactions in various situations involving crisis as they unfold in real time. The topics range from preparing and training for

crises before they have happened to ongoing live crisis; how decision-making happens in time-limited environments which are also uncertain or ambiguous in nature; how professionals deal with unpredictable external challenges (e.g., technology failure), and how the management of extraordinary events may nevertheless be routinized. The papers in the special issue show how interaction in crisis settings actually unfolds, moment by moment and step by step. They complement an emerging body of EMCA work on acute crisis, which is not only proving impactful on the organizations themselves (e.g., via research-based training), but also on our fundamental understanding of the organization of talk.

Keywords

Crisis, conflict, emergency, interaction, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, institutional talk, emergency calls, suicide helplines, police-lay person interactions, mass casualty incidents, crisis management training

Introduction to the Special Issue

The aim of this *Special Issue* is to introduce research that investigates rare, acute, *hard-to-access* interactional encounters in situations of crisis, conflict, and emergency – and to do so by working with recordings and transcripts of live, unfolding events. That is, each of the papers in the special issue investigate *low frequency* but *high stakes* communication between crisis negotiators, emergency services, and related professionals – and sometimes with members of the public who are service users – using conversation analysis. By *low frequency*, we refer to the fact that our datasets comprise events that are recurrent for the professionals involved but low occurrence compared to other kinds of institutional encounters (e.g., there are likely to be far more calls to one primary care service than there are hostage negotiations in one country, county or region). By *high stakes*, we refer to the matters being dealt with by interacting parties, which involve threat to life, to social order or, potentially, death. And by *hard-to-access*, we mean that the research sites each involve extensive negotiation with relevant stakeholders, often leading to the co-production of knowledge with those professionals whose job is to communicate with people in crisis of various kinds – and even the training of those professionals.

Despite the crisis communication field being very large, and populated by researchers and practitioners across many disciplines, readers are generally given little access to crisis communication directly, since transcripts are not routinely published as part of research reporting. One motivation for conducting conversation analytic research on any given communication topic and in any given context is because so much of the human and social sciences examine social interaction in experimental settings (see Holleman et al, 2020) or via retrospective reporting on surveys or in interviews. This is also true for crisis communication, where even analyses of, for instance, “actual hostage negotiations” (Donohue & Roberto, 1993, p. 184), using “detailed chronological transcriptions” (Rogan, 2011, p. 26) or “transcripts produced from audiotapes of interactions” (Giebels & Taylor, 2009, p. 8), seldom present such transcripts in publications. This means that direct access to and scrutiny of live unfolding negotiations is relatively rare. The papers presented in the *Special Issue* therefore show – turn by turn, word by word, and even breath by breath – how communication in crisis settings actually unfolds.

The *Special Issue* presents studies from live crisis situations (police negotiations with suicidal persons, suicide helplines, police-lay people interactions, call/dispatch centres) to training simulations (mass casualty exercises, crisis management training in UN military observer training), and from audio-only telephone calls to complex multimodal events. The papers examine a range of topics, from preparing and training for crisis before it has happened to ongoing live crisis; from how decision-making happens in time-limited environments which are also uncertain or ambiguous in nature; how professionals deal with unpredictable external challenges (e.g., technology failure), and how the management of extraordinary events may nevertheless be routinized.

Background to the Special Issue

In December 2019, the co-editors organized a workshop entitled “Talk in crisis and emergency situations” at Loughborough University, sponsored by Loughborough’s Institute for Advanced Studies. The workshop emerged from Haddington and Stokoe’s shared interest in the organization and practice of social interaction in crisis situations. The workshop brought together ten researchers from the UK, Finland, Sweden, the USA and Germany. Each participant had unique access to crisis and emergency settings and their constituent audio and video recordings,

coupled with a shared methodological framework in ethnomethodology (EM), including conversation (CA) and multimodal analysis.

The *Special Issue* applies the theoretical background and methodological rigour of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA) to interaction in settings that are largely unstudied or understudied. From its very beginnings (Sacks, 1966), EMCA research has continued to analyse institutional and organizational settings (for examples and overviews, see Antaki, 2011; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Lester & O'Reilly, 2019; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010; Wong & Waring, 2020). However, this work has not typically focused on moments of crisis where there is an *immediate* threat to life for at least one of the parties to that interaction, or when dealing with such threats is core to training and simulation. This is in part because such encounters are hard to access, requiring lengthy negotiations with the partner organizations whose work is under empirical scrutiny. The papers that comprise this *Special Issue* augment an emerging body of EMCA work on acute crisis, which is proving impactful on the organizations themselves (e.g., via research-based training) as well as on our fundamental understanding of the organization of talk. As our work has shown – including in an earlier paper in *Journal of Pragmatics* (Stokoe et al, 2019) – interaction in crisis and conflict settings has begun to interrogate established understandings of core concepts in conversation analysis. For example, Stokoe and colleagues showed that, rather than indicating an upcoming dispreferred response, delayed turns in crisis negotiation often preceded ‘preferred’ responses that indicated a turning point towards a successful outcome. Likewise, each of the papers in the SI makes visible core aspects of the social organization of crisis communication, contributing not just to what we know about those settings, but also the fundamentals of our discipline (Kevoe-Feldman, 2019).

Crisis Communication, Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

The *Special Issue* has multiple relevancies to, and extends, current research on crisis communication most broadly and to interactional studies of crisis and emergency settings more specifically. The papers sit in a wider body of EMCA work on crisis and communication that started with the beginning of CA itself, and Harvey Sacks’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s on talk and interaction in suicide helpline calls (e.g., Sacks, 1967). Other classic work in CA has also taken emergency settings and crisis as its focus, such as Whalen and Zimmerman’s (1990) paper about the fatal failure of a call to 911 and Heath and Luff’s (1992) investigations of

crisis management in the London Underground control room. A further goal of this *Special Issue* has been to bring some of this early work full circle, via papers by Clara Iversen (Uppsala University) and Heidi Kevoe-Feldman (Northeastern University) on suicide helplines and calls to 911 dispatch, and by Krug and Pitsch on the management of multi-agency professionals at the scene of accidents. Each paper charts the path through earlier EMCA work to their own research, including through other landmark papers and the wider field relevant to crisis and emergency interaction including research on paramedic emergency drills (Deppermann, 2014), on interaction and collaboration in the battlefield (Mair et al, 2012; Nevile, 2009, 2013), on emergency team assessment of mass casualty events (Büscher, 2007), and on mountain rescue training (Smith, 2020, 2022).

In the past fifteen years, *Journal of Pragmatics* has published a number of papers that support the context for this *Special Issue*, including some that focus on negotiations and mediations involving the police, interactions in emergency calls, emergency interactions in air traffic communication and crisis management training. For example, Sikveland (2019) analysed the phonetic features of police negotiators' summoning of persons in crisis after initially failing to get a response. He shows how particular phonetic features accomplish and can be associated with 'redoing' of summonses or securing joint attention, or to indicate danger and concern. Addressing both a fundamental concept in conversation analysis ('preference organization') and what they term interaction in the 'backstage' to unaddressed participants, Stokoe et al (2020) explored the design of 'preferred' responses in contexts including interactions with individuals in crisis (e.g., police negotiations with suicidal persons and calls to emergency services). They showed that after one party has resisted the project of the other, 'delayed' responses, in contrast to what prior EMCA research has shown, may indicate a productive response and alignment, and enable the speaker to maintain 'face'. Oittinen (2022) focused on word finding problems in military meetings in a crisis management exercise in English as a Lingua Franca interactions. The study explored the coordination of word searches and practices by which assistance for finding the word is recruited and word searches completed together. Such collaborative practices have the potential to support the accomplishment of situational awareness in multinational crisis work.

Journal of Pragmatics has also published several studies of calls from members of the public to emergency services. For instance, Svennevig (2012) focused on identifying operator

and caller practices that get treated as complaints, rejections or reproaches and thus generate hostility, conflict and misalignment (see also Monzoni, 2009). The emergence of trouble was also the subject of Natrass et al's (2017) analysis of South African Emergency Medical Service calls. They focused specifically on the challenge of establishing the location of the emergency, which is critical for sending assistance. They showed that sharing or lacking local geographical references could lead to misspeaking or recipient recognition problems, which could also be exacerbated by mismatches between how callers formulated places versus the computerised systems used to supporting location identification. Another type of interactional challenge was examined in Cromdal et al's (2008) research on children's emergency calls and how, during the early phases of calls, the operator supports child callers (including very young callers) to nevertheless produce sufficiently "institutionally 'workable' reports" (p. 949) to proceed with emergency dispatch. Finally, Garcia's (2015, 2016) case studies of air traffic communication have shown, for example, how communicating the main potential for danger can become submerged in establishing smaller details, as well as how, when air traffic control staff and pilots switched to formats resembling ordinary conversation, or to so-called 'hybrid' formats, they were more effective than routine Air Traffic Control styles. These and other papers are reviewed in the papers in our *Special Issue*.

Of course, outside the EMCA literature, there is a *much* bigger literature – both academic and practitioner-based – on the history, development, theory and practice of crisis communication, including interrogating 'crisis' and its related concepts as a theoretical and macro-level phenomenon (e.g., Chilwa, 2021; De Rycker & Mohd, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The field takes in work that spans psychology, law, sociology, and linguistics, on planning and teamwork (e.g., Coombs, 2014; Huang & Holmgreen, 2020); resilience, coping, and decision-making (e.g., van den Heuvel et al, 2012); crisis communication training (e.g., Vecchi et al, 2005) and strategies for interacting based in part on models of crisis communication (e.g., Van Hasselt et al, 2007). One of the most cited models for negotiation practice is the 'Behavioural Change Stairway Model' (BCSM) and its variant, the 'Behavioural Influence Stairway Model' (BISM: Van Hasselt et al, 2007). From the BISM to other models of crisis communication, the constituent stages overlap with almost any articulation of what counts as 'communication skills' across professional settings.

However, a common feature of crisis communication models is the omission, in much empirical work, of capturing and analyzing the ‘in the wild’ reality of relevant encounters from which to develop theory, models, and guidance. This means that there is a wealth of literature on *interactional* strategies that are discussed without reference to actual interaction, or only refer to invented examples – neither of which consider how they may be manifest in the sequential organization of interaction (e.g., Royce, 2005). For example, Noesner and Webster (1997) classify “verbal skills” relevant to crisis communication including ‘back-channelling’; ‘silence/pausing’, and ‘questions’; McMains and Mullins (2014) group together strategies like ‘paraphrasing’, ‘summarizing’, and ‘reflecting feelings.’ These kinds of terms consolidate under other categories, like ‘rapport’ or ‘active listening.’ However, most academics in the fields of pragmatics, interactional linguistics, and conversation analysis, will immediately understand that such categories provide only the most gross caricature of how interaction works (Sikveland et al, 2019). As Rubin (2016) notes, practices such as ‘rapport building’ and ‘influence’, are “amorphous and nebulous”: “it is less clear what the linguistic features are that trainers can point to in order to help negotiators achieve” (p. 9). For instance, ‘summarizing’ someone else’s talk can be a powerful way to demonstrate shared understandings, to drive an institutional encounter forward, but also to transform versions of events in ways that undermine one party or another (Houwen & Sliedrecht 2016).

Each of the papers in the *Special Issue* provides its own detailed literature review of relevant work in their particular domain of crisis communication, and we refer readers to their papers to learn more. We also refer readers to Sikveland et al.’s (2022) book-length treatment of research on crisis negotiation in cases of personal crisis and suicide. But next, we move on to summarize the contribution of each of the papers and their collective contribution to the fields they are working within.

Overview of the papers

The first paper, by Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen (2022), brings together two canonical conversation analytic settings – suicide helplines (e.g., Sacks, 1966) and police emergency services (e.g., Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990) – in a comparative analysis that brings fresh insights to both institutions in the case of suicidal callers. Their aim is to conduct a comparative analysis of how call-takers in police emergency services sometimes provide emotional support to

get callers to provide their location, and how call-takers in suicide helplines sense that callers need emergency services. The paper is based around an analysis of two datasets (the languages of which are English and Swedish). The first comprises calls to a USA-based 911 police emergency service – Kevoe-Feldman is a trained and certified emergency medical dispatcher and has a certification in crisis negotiation for telecommunicators. The second, collected by Iversen, comprises calls to the Swedish suicide helpline. The authors explain carefully the training received by the call-takers in their datasets, and the various procedural and communication protocols that are involved. Their analysis shows that and how suicide helpline calls may rapidly become emergency situations, but that call-takers are not supported or trained for such contingencies. By contrast, 911 call-takers are attuned to dealing with urgent matters but may be less effective when it comes to handling emotion. By focusing on suicidal callers in both cases, Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen demonstrate how the professionals in both settings can learn from each other and how their research may be translated into training practice.

Stokoe, Sikveland and Hamann's (2022) paper also focuses on communication in the case of suicide crisis, but this time focusing on police negotiation. Specifically, they examine the behind-the-scenes conversation between negotiators as they prepare their approach, reflect on their progress, and plan their next turns at talk with the person in crisis, or how they will engage them or otherwise overcome a communication problem. Since police negotiators work in small units or teams, not all team members are tasked with interacting directly with the person in crisis. This means that, for some negotiators, there are opportunities for them to discuss matters between themselves, as well as convey information to and from the scene to operational leads. However, because the person in crisis may refuse to participate, or fall asleep, or otherwise not participate in conversation, there are multiple occasions throughout the negotiation for negotiators to talk between themselves. Stokoe et al. analysed what they refer to as 'interstitial sequences' in an English-language corpus of audio-recorded UK suicide crisis negotiations, provided by police as part of a co-produced research project that, as well as research outputs (e.g., Stokoe et al, 2019; Sikveland et al, 2021), also produced communication training using the 'Conversation Analytic Role-play Method' (Stokoe, 2011). Like Kevoe-Feldman, Sikveland attended police negotiation training on a two-week intensive course as a participant observer. Their analysis focused on how negotiators talk about communication itself, including their evaluation of different communication technologies and modalities (e.g., telephone versus face-

to-face) and physical locations (e.g., standing on the ground versus on a roof), as well as what and how to communicate with persons in crisis and what specific words and phrases they deemed effective. In this way, Stokoe et al.'s paper gives unique access to teams working to plan turn-by-turn conversation, and how 'members', in the ethnomethodological sense, make everyday life accountable (Garfinkel, 1967). That is, the enactment of team roles rests partly on their ability to ongoingly analyse their interactions with the person in crisis.

The coordination of talk and embodied conduct between two or more professional parties interacting with a person in some kind of crisis is also the subject of Pehkonen's paper (Pehkonen, 2022). Based on documentary recordings of Finnish police officers encountering, approaching, and interacting with drunken persons in public spaces, Pehkonen identifies several practices for responding to what often amounts to undecipherable turns. The language in the recordings is Finnish. As discussed in the article, 'drunk' talk is interesting since it sometimes departs from the norms of sequential organization and turn-taking, both in terms of non-responsiveness but also in terms of the production of unclear actions or sequentially dislocated turns. It is also difficult to capture on camera, and Pehkonen deals with the fact that his materials come from a television documentary series by carefully explaining how he managed issues of clearly edited sequences and cutaways to interviews with the police 'stars' of the series. He also discusses the ethical issues arising from the fact that the documentary series is primarily for the entertainment of the public, alongside the dual moral accountability of the person themselves, as breaching public order, as well as filming people who are incapacitated – including whether people are resisting, unwilling, or cognitively unable to interact with the police officers. Pehkonen describes how the police officers respond to drunk persons including treating their undecipherable turns as irrelevant to the unfolding course of action through to offering candidate hearings of their turns and formulating something the drunk person may have said. He also considers how the categorization of the drunk person as intoxicated and somewhat laughable and morally accountable – they *chose* to get drunk – versus unwell and thus serious, and beyond the person's moral agency and accountability.

The remaining papers all examine subsets of hard-to-access recordings of talk and embodied conduct collected during lengthy training events and programmes for professionals. That is, the authors examine the simulations that are nevertheless naturally occurring events for the practitioners involved. Although the stakes are different in these settings (that is, if they are

shot during training, it will not be by a real bullet), they are nevertheless high for those involved because the events they are training for are high stakes but low frequency. Indeed, even with training and simulations, a practitioner may never actually attend a live event during their career but must be prepared to do so with little warning. In Krug and Pitsch's (2022) paper, they examine talk and interactions that comprise training for a mass casualty incident in Germany and in German. Coordinating actions and tasks between members of emergency and rescue teams when moving injured people, and working under time pressure, requires the careful coordination of embodied actions. Krug and Pitsch focus on counting as a 'precise coordination practice' ("one – two – three") to coordinate the start of moving an injured person's body from a trapped position. They show how the practice allows participants to carefully synchronize – in situations with limited visibility – several actions simultaneously, carry out last-minute adjustments (allowed by the projectability of the counting) and perform the moving action proper. They also identify similar phonetic features across the examples, which accomplish the predictability and coordination of the moving action.

The final three papers each emerge from a large-scale project called 'PeaceTalk' that studies talk and interaction in multinational crisis management training involving both civilian and military personnel (see Haddington et al, 2020; Haddington et al. 2021; Rautiainen 2021; Rautiainen 2022). The project collaborates closely with FINCENT (Finnish Defence Forces International Centre) and CMC Finland (Crisis Management Centre Finland). FINCENT organises military crisis management training for personnel working in operations led by United Nations, NATO, African Union and European Union. CMC Finland is a Finnish organisation that is responsible, for example, for recruiting and training civilian personnel from different countries to work in crisis management missions around the world. Gaining access to such sensitive research sites has required several years of negotiations and meetings with the organisers of the training. Like Kevoe-Feldman and Sikveland, it has involved long periods of ethnographic field work during which the researchers have participated in the training activities by following and observing the trainees and talking with the instructors. The broader project has collected video recordings from several crisis management courses (e.g., from a multinational joint staff exercise called VIKING18 and an online course on the protection of civilians in crisis missions called UNPOC). The three papers (Rautiainen et al, 2022; Kamunen et al, 2022; Haddington et al. 2022) in this *Special Issue* centre around interaction during a training

programme organized by FINCENT for future military observers for United Nations missions around the world. The recordings were collected during two consecutive and identical courses called UNMEM (United Nations Military Experts on Mission).

The aim of UNMEM is to train military observers, who are unarmed soldiers, for operational tasks and responsibilities such as monitoring peace and cease-fire agreements, patrolling crisis areas and demilitarised zones, and helping resolve local crises and challenges. The trainees' working language is English as a lingua franca; in the courses, none of the trainees were native English speakers. The subset of data in the three papers come from recordings made inside (and partly outside) SUV vehicles during patrolling exercises. The patrolling exercises are exercises organized across an extensive physical landscape (e.g., forests) in which the teams patrol an imaginary demilitarized zone and its surroundings. Patrol exercises last for an entire day, during which the patrolling teams visit military positions and see real weapons, artillery, vehicles, and troops. There are no instructors present in the vehicles or along their routes; the teams must solve problems and challenging situations themselves, with only the radio as their resource. Additionally, the teams' actions and other events have consequences so that the trainees may "die", be injured or be robbed during the exercise. Some of the tasks may be distressful.

The first paper, co-authored by Rautiainen, Haddington and Kamunen (2022), focuses on the radio-mediated communication that occurs between participants in patrolling exercises in military observer training. In particular, they focus on how miscommunication – including misunderstandings and mishearings – are dealt with using what Rautiainen et al. refer to as 'fixed form repair initiators.' Rather than use more typical open-class repair initiators (e.g., "what?", "huh?"), which have been studied extensively by conversation analysts, the authors show how "say again" is used as to initiate repair and get recipients to repeat their previous turn. They describe how such phrases function as 'procedure words'; that is, they carry only one meaning regardless of sequential location, to support clarity and uniformity. However, the authors note that, rather than achieve clarity, the "say again" phrase can lead to interactional trouble, since it "foregrounds troubles of hearing over other types of trouble" and there "are no phrases to further communicate what kind of trouble the recipient has." Rautiainen et al. show that, despite its fixed meaning in theory, in practice the trainees treat "say again" in various ways and as initiating various sequences of problem-solving.

In the second paper, focusing on the same dataset, Kamunen, Haddington and Rautiainen (2022) study the UN military observer trainees' decision-making processes as they encounter a simulated, "life-threatening" incident during the patrolling exercise. They focus on what happens between the first noticing of the incident and the decision regarding the next action and analyse how the team members assess the situation and come to a joint decision on the next action. The analysis shows how the team members jointly assess the visible incident either as safe or dangerous. The way in which the interaction unfolds in these situations is important because incorrect interpretations often put the team in danger, and teams consistently "die" in this exercise. The analysis also shows how earlier events during the patrolling exercise can influence the decision-making process, as they provide a context against which the team evaluates the unfolding event. The analysis is important, because while the instructors can see *what* happens during this task, they do not have access to *why* it happens. Hence, the findings can inform the training of future UN military observers.

The third paper by Haddington, Kamunen and Rautiainen (2022) focuses on noticing actions. As previous conversation analytic research has shown, in mundane interactions noticings have low response relevance and do not prescribe a specific action in response. In the context of military observation, the analysis shows how noticing actions are designed to and interpreted as inviting team members' shared orientation to the noticed feature. Furthermore, the noticings are designed and interpreted in two ways, building a context for the team to accomplish their task. First, they can make relevant the 'monitoring' or 'scanning' of the surroundings for more things to see. In this case, the noticed feature is not treated as a reportable thing. Second, they can make relevant the 'observation' of the noticed thing, listing and detailing its features. In this case, the noticed feature is treated as something that needs to be reported. The ways in which noticing episodes unfold are crucial first steps for the teams to establish a shared understanding of the noticed feature. They can also have high stakes implications, because military observers are responsible for producing detailed and accurate reports of their observations to the UN. Additionally, a timely and correct noticing may be a matter of safety, even life and death. Failing to notice appropriately or at all can thus have political implications or become a safety issue (see also Nevile 2013a, 2013b). Noticing actions also constitute the military observers' "professional vision"; that is, the practices by which they shape the visible environment into profession-specific objects of knowledge (see Goodwin 1994).

Conclusion

In sum, the *Special Issue* provides access to low frequency but high stakes encounters to understand how outcomes and the course of events may be shaped by the interactional practices that comprise them. While the outcomes of crisis encounters may well be mapped to individual cognitive abilities, personality, motivations, and so on, this is well-trodden territory that has neglected to examine what actually happens in live, unfolding communication. Indeed, the dispatchers, medics, police, soldiers, call-handlers seldom if ever – beyond simulated and scripted events in training – are granted access to the private psychology of the individuals they must interact with in order to mobilize a bespoke strategy; that is, they cannot gain access to a person’s medical history, mental health records, or even their identity while at the scene of a crisis. Instead, they have the practices of social interaction and treat every turn taken by those in crisis as the thing that will shape the very next thing that they say (Stokoe, 2018). The papers also continue to underpin the provision of insight and evidence-based interventions for the professionals whose job is to bring low frequency but high stakes encounters to successful outcomes. We hope that the special issue will stimulate further research not only on the communicative encounters of people in acute and often life-threatening situations, but also show that and how it is possible to gain access to hard-to-reach settings and work with professionals outside academia and together co-develop our knowledge,

Articles in the special issue

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Bionotes

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