

‘Something really weird has happened’: Losing the ‘big picture’ in emergency service calls



Angela Cora Garcia ^{a,b,*}

^a Department of Sociology, Bentley University, 175 Forest Street, Waltham, MA 02452, USA

^b Department of Global Studies, Bentley University, 175 Forest Street, Waltham, MA 02452, USA

Received 28 May 2014; received in revised form 7 May 2015; accepted 10 May 2015

Abstract

This paper is a single case analysis of an emergency service call in which the caller failed to convince the call taker that the request for service was urgent in what turned out to be a tragic event. The analysis of this call using the techniques and findings of conversation analysis reveals that the actions of both the call taker and the caller created an interactional context in which the “big picture” (the potential for danger), became repeatedly submerged in “small picture” details (such as the identity and location of the caller and her role in the situation). This paper builds on previous research on how callers can fail to construct convincing descriptions of the problem and extends this line of work by exploring how participants make or fail to make inferences in order to construct a gestalt or big picture of the event being reported, how participants manage events that unfold during the call, and how callers convey their identity and role in the situation. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Emergency service call; Conversation analysis; Technologically mediated interaction; Qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

Previous studies have investigated emergency phone calls in which a failure of communication led to a delay in the provision of service (e.g., [Garcia and Parmer, 1999](#); [Imbens-Bailey and McCabe, 2000](#); [Whalen et al., 1988](#); [Svennevig, 2012](#)). For example, in a call analyzed by [Whalen et al. \(1988\)](#) the emergence of an argument between the caller and the call taker changed the interactional structure of the call such that information was interpreted differently than it would have been in a more routine context. For this and a variety of other reasons, the call taker did not discern the legitimacy and urgency of the call. Unfortunately, because of the delay in providing service which resulted from this problematic interaction, the caller’s mother died before an ambulance could reach her ([Whalen et al., 1988](#)).

[Garcia and Parmer \(1999\)](#) analyzed an emergency service call in which the call taker failed to treat the caller’s report that two police officers had been shot as a high priority emergency, thus delaying the provision of service. Although the caller made repeated attempts to get an ambulance for the dying officers, he also produced unresolved disjunctures ([Clayman, 1985](#)) and unwarranted topic shifts, and failed to produce a coherent narrative description of the events he was reporting. These actions led the call taker to doubt the veracity of the caller’s claims.

* Correspondence to: Department of Sociology, Bentley University, 175 Forest Street, Waltham, MA 02452, USA. Tel.: +1 781 891 3154.
E-mail address: agarcia@bentley.edu.

Maynard's (2005) analysis of how participants form a gestalt is useful to frame the discussion of how emergency call takers may fail to see the "big picture" in calls reporting unfolding or ongoing emergencies:

"[P]articipants' social actions have a gestalt character to them in the original social psychological sense of that term, where the whole is somehow larger than its constituent parts. Mostly, investigators have treated gestalt coherence as inhering in perceptual objects, whereas the thesis here is that participants also produce and understand the relevance of particular forms of talk-based activity through an orientation to gestalt assembly." (Maynard, 2005:499)

For example, Drew (1985) analyzes an accessory to murder trial in which the meaning of the mundane act of knocking on a door was in contention. The defendant had preceded an accomplice up the stairs in the victim's building and knocked on his door. The attorney asked questions designed to show that the defendant's intention in knocking was to lure the victim to open the door so that her accomplice could shoot him, while the defendant's answers were designed to show that she knocked on the door to warn the victim that the shooter was coming—each participant worked to create a different gestalt from the same series of actions.

Maynard (2005) describes the social practices involved constructing a gestalt in interaction by analyzing how autistic children respond to questions in a diagnostic test. In the testing situation, the tester routinely produces a sequence of questions and proceeds from one question to the next regardless of whether the question has been "correctly" answered. While in the testing situation the tester may ignore the substance of an incorrect response and simply record it as incorrect, the call taker in an emergency call ignores "incorrect" or incomplete responses at their peril. If information is not received, instead of simply going on to the next question the call taker may try to repair an absent or inadequate answer or use other techniques to pursue an answer, including repetition of the question. The big picture or gestalt of the action (e.g., as a "test" or as a "911 call") therefore is tied to the actions participants take in the exchange, as well as their interpretation of each other's actions.

This paper builds on previous research on how callers to emergency service lines can fail to construct convincing descriptions of the problem. It extends this line of work by exploring how participants make or fail to make inferences in order to construct a gestalt or big picture understanding of the problem. I will show how in one particular 911 call, due to actions of both participants, the call taker fails to draw upshots from the caller's informings and to make connections between information provided at different points in the call. I will show how the call taker's failure to see the "big picture" was accomplished through their joint actions, in particular how the interrogative series was constructed, and how the caller's identity and role in the situation was understood.

2. Data and methods

In this paper I conduct a single case analysis of an emergency service call in which the actions of both participants contribute to the failure of the call to obtain a timely police response for a potentially dangerous unfolding emergency. The call is related to a high profile murder suicide which occurred in 2012. A man had been suspected of killing his wife several years previously, and had recently lost custody of their two children (Losavio, 2012). When a social worker took the children to his house for a supervised visit, he locked her out of the house, killed the children and set the house on fire. The call analyzed in this paper is the first emergency service call received about the incident and was placed by the social worker shortly after she was locked out (a few minutes before the fire occurred). While the social worker tried to warn the call taker that the children might be in danger, the call taker did not discern the urgency of her request so an immediate police response was not provided.

With hindsight, many have asked why help was not provided more quickly (Crimestopper Staff, 2012; Duke, 2012; Johnson and Baker, 2012; Mungin, 2012). Media reports focused on several problematic aspects of the call including the call taker's apparent confusion over the identity of the caller and the large number of questions he asked, some of which seemed unnecessary given the events that unfolded (Crimestopper Staff, 2012). Although the "Mark Howell" case had been a high profile news story for a number of months prior to this incident, this call taker either did not know of the case or did not recognize the name in the context of this call (Duke, 2012). An investigation revealed that the call taker thought the caller was the mother of the children and did not understand that her role was the social worker supervising the visit (Duke, 2012). The call taker thought the caller's perception of urgency was due to the emotionally laden nature of family problems, rather than a realistic fear of imminent danger (Duke, 2012). The call taker ordered a police response about seven minutes after the call began—about five and a half minutes after he obtained the address from the caller (Losavio, 2012). He gave the call a priority two ranking, indicating an "imminent danger to life or property" (Caulfield, 2012). Even had this call proceeded much more quickly, help would probably not have arrived soon enough to prevent the tragic events that occurred (Sullivan and Claridge, 2012; Warren, 2012). However, lessons learned from this call may help future call takers and callers conduct these interactions more effectively and efficiently.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7298047>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7298047>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)