Commentary 2: 
Psychotherapy – The art of slow inquiry and gradual discovery

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Conversation analysis (CA), the sequential analysis of multimodal interaction, has been conducted in relation to the study of psychotherapy for about two decades now. During this period, applied conversation analysis has become an increasingly prominent focus of CA.

Conversation analytic research of institutional interaction has been known to formulate research questions in ways that have remained ‘agnostic’ towards the profession’s own theories of interaction. Professional theories interaction, or ‘stocks of interactional knowledge’ (Peräkylä and Vehviläinen 2003), are generally centered around normative concepts and ideals, the latter describing the outcome sought after in an institutional context and the ways in which the outcome is expected to be accomplished through social encounters. The detachment from such normative notions in CA originated from ethnomethodology (Heritage 1984), and soon took the form of studying the interaction order (Goffman 1983) as a phenomenon in its own right. For CA, this also meant coming up with a vocabulary of its own to talk about interactional phenomena.

However, in CA of psychotherapy, it has now become more customary to formulate research problems in somewhat more mixed language. Thus, researchers of psychotherapeutic interaction frame their studies in terms both of clinical theories and CA notions (for recent overviews, see Weiste and Peräkylä 2015; Peräkylä 2019). As pointed out by several researchers, psychotherapy aims at changing the client’s experience – emotion, relationships or agency (Voutilainen et al. 2018; Peräkylä 2019). Thus, CA in the context of psychotherapy with applied interests is geared towards understanding how the micro orders of the psychotherapeutic encounter carry out change in the client’s experience. The contributors to the Special Issue take this interest as their starting point.

Change in personal experience and agency is sought out in many other institutional settings, too: in education, social work, rehabilitation, physiotherapy, speech therapy and coaching, to name a few. It is common in our modern societies to turn to (or become directed towards) institutionalized help when in need of support or solutions in life problems. What are the characteristics of psychotherapeutic change, and how do they figure in the micro-interactional level? I will suggest three such characteristics and use them to reflect on the articles included in the Special Issue. These characteristics are (1) the heavy reliance on talk-in-interaction, (2) the heightened interest in the topical content and (3) the time span of gradual psychotherapeutic change.

The reliance on talk: Clients’ reports, emotions and actions in the therapy encounter

‘The talking cure’ is a frequently used moniker for psychotherapy. The change that is sought out in
psychotherapy, the work that is done prior to the change taking place, as well as the 'data' that are used for the therapeutic work itself, are accessed mainly (often solely) through talk. There are of course exceptions (for instance, therapies that use music or art to create as affordances for cure), but, in general, psychotherapies are heavily mediated by talk, so that all the 'materials' for observations and inferences used in these therapies are based on what the clients tell and how they interact with the therapist. The client's task of reporting on their experience is a prominent issue also in psycho-diagnostic situations where the client's mental health is being assessed. In general, clients must speak about their experiences in specific and credible ways that allow diagnosing, which in this Special Issue is shown in the article by Spranz-Fogasy and co-authors.

In psychotherapeutic talk, the client's experience becomes available in two ways: in his or her reports of it, and the way in which the client demonstrates it in his or her emotions and actions. Emotion – or 'affect' in more technical terminology – is a central means of communication that is constantly oriented to in psychotherapy talk. It communicates both about the client's reality and about the therapeutic relationship. Emotion has lately become perhaps the central analytic interest in CA of psychotherapy; in this vein, Pawelczyk's article shows how the therapist accomplishes emotional availability by topicalizing the client's current emotion in terms of both explicit nonverbal cues (such as tears) and implicit cues, thereby eliciting their self-disclosures about present emotions. In family and couples therapy, also, clients' relationships with each other become available through their talk – or their avoidance of it. In their article, Muntigl and Horvath point to some of the ways in which the therapist can influence the client's interactions, to encourage engagement and thereby working together towards a therapeutic change.

Also, the therapist's interventions are mediated solely by talk-in-interaction, instead of combinations of talk and other elements, such as physical examination, measurements, documents or other materials. As shown in Scarvaglieri's article, talk conveys topical foci that work towards relevant changes in the client's experience. The therapist's emotional stance, too, is conveyed in interaction: this is a key element of the emotional work that brings about the therapeutic change, as discussed by Voutilainen and Peräkylä. Thus, we may say that therapeutic talk is particularly attuned to the distinction and recognition of fine-grained variation and nuances of topical and emotional shifts. There is something almost art-like in the expressive task of psychotherapy talk.

Changes in experienced reality: Topic as an analytic question

Psychotherapy seeks to change the ways in which clients experience and act upon their personal meanings and lives. Peräkylä (2019) suggests that psychotherapeutic change takes place through sequences of talk, and the transformation has three empirically observable loci: emotion, referent of the talk and relationships. To identify the fine-grained changes in these elements, researchers must pay attention to the content of the talk and the topical continuities and discontinuities within and across sessions. CA is not 'content analysis' as such, but it has never been merely formal or technical, either. To analyze social action, one must analyze the interplay between form and content. How else could, for instance, ‘troubles talk’ (Jefferson 1988), death (Pino and Parry 2019) or another ‘dreaded topic’ (Peräkylä 1993) be analyzed?

Scarvaglieri takes a pronounced stance on the issue by turning to formulations, a thoroughly researched topic in CA of psychotherapy (Antaki 2008; Weiste and Peräkylä 2013). Formulations have been shown to be a key tool for the therapeutic labor; for co-constructing and redesigning therapeutically relevant meanings. In Scarvaglieri's paper the topical content of a formulation becomes the focus of the analysis. Using tools from cognitive linguistics along with CA, he shows that not only does the therapist reformulate some aspect of the client's experience, but he or she does it in ways that help re-frame that experience in terms of the client's social relationships. Topical or thematic analysis has been brought to the agenda also from another angle: Voutilainen and colleagues (Voutilainen et al. 2018) have studied in longitudinal settings how topics or 'thematic threads' become re-introduced in therapy sessions, but in varied sequential environments.
Psychotherapeutic projects: Gradual and nonlinear processes

Psychotherapy is an art of slow inquiry and gradual discovery. Change is co-constructed gradually over time. Key practices of talk are repeated over and over again, both within and across encounters. There is progress, but also resistance and setbacks. This has motivated CA researchers to focus on interactional projects, or ‘psychotherapeutic projects’ as Peräkylä (2019) puts it. Furthermore, researchers of psychotherapeutic interaction have become interested in the longitudinal approach to change, in which psychotherapeutic change is seen to be manifested in the observable changes in how the client participates in the therapeutic interaction.

Early longitudinal CA studies were not from psychotherapeutic but from pedagogical settings (Martin 2004; Young and Miller 2004; Melander and Sahlström 2009). However, in the CA of psychotherapy, longitudinal approaches came into focus at the point when an understanding of the central tools and interventions had started to crystallize (for instance, Voutilainen et al. 2011; Bercelli et al. 2013; Voutilainen et al. 2018). The here-and-now time of the sequential analysis started to make room for another time span: the procession across sessions.

Another relevant aspect of this longitudinal time span is the psychotherapeutic take on client resistance. It is understood in all therapies that things belonging to the realm of individual mind and experience will not change quickly, nor without obstacles and resistance. As personal meanings, relationships and patterns of behavior have been built gradually in a process of biographical and societal construction, reshaping them is always an arduous task. The human mind is simultaneously ever-changing and resistant to change.

Therefore, in psychotherapy, client resistance or misalignment is not treated as a problem or a failure. It is rather ‘part of the package’. This is perhaps why we seldom find CA studies where sequential analyses are carried out to identify the ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ ways of carrying out a certain practice. Such analyses are common in service encounter settings where we find, for instance, advice being either received or resisted (Heritage and Sefi 1992), or treatment recommendations accepted or resisted (Stivers 2004). Of course, in psychotherapy, too, we find variation in clients’ responses to interventions (see, for instance, Peräkylä 2005). However, the time span for determining successful practice is much longer than one session.

Thus, concerning CA of psychotherapy and the issue of change, we need to deal with two relevant time spans: (a) the ‘micro’ time span of the sequential analysis, studying the ‘tools’ or practices of therapy as carriers of the therapeutic agendas, and the ways in which clients either join or decline to join these projects; and (b) the ‘macro’ time span, examining gradual variation and change across several sessions, i.e., how the client’s activities change over time or how the joint work between the client and the therapist qualitatively changes in different phases of the therapy. Of course, there is also a third level, an outcome study, but this is not represented in this Special Issue. The question is how different ways of conducting the entire therapy process vary in their outcome. Such research is still scarce (although see Kontunen et al. 2019; Savander et al. 2019).

The articles in this special issue: Tools for change and qualitative variation in phases of therapy

All the articles in this Special Issue seem to support the key idea that successful therapy changes the agency of the client by widening the possibility for self-observation and awareness. To further summarize the approaches to change in these articles, they seem to fall into two categories.

Firstly, four of the five articles focus on interventions that are viewed as necessary conditions for change, i.e., key elements of the ‘change-producing machinery’. In a sense, these articles follow the recipe of the more traditional institutional CA. They focus on therapists’ reoccurring interventions that are relevant for the institutional task at hand. They operate on the micro-level time span of sequential analysis. In addition, the claim is also made that these interventions are crucial for therapeutic change to happen, since they carry a key psychotherapeutic orientation or principle: therapeutic alliance and therapist’s emotional availability (Pawelczyk), relational work either by
engaging the clients in mutual interaction (Muntigl and Horvath) or by reframing clients’ experiences in relationally relevant ways (Scarvaglieri), and accomplishing psychodiagnostics work by eliciting expansions on self-reports (Spranz-Fogasy and co-authors). The assumption of what is crucial for change is taken from the psychotherapeutic theory, but the analyses are carried out in CA terms.

There is one article that uses a wider time span or a more ‘macro’ approach. Voutilainen and Peräkylä introduce the idea of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ therapies. They make the observation that in some therapies in their data, the participants use more variation in their affective stances in the psychotherapy encounter – i.e. there are more ‘open’ possibilities for self-reflection and observation for the client. In others, the participants remain in a more fixed affective stance, so these therapies are more ‘closed’ in terms of the possibilities they allow. While the other four papers concentrate on phenomena that have been identified in psychotherapeutic theory, this particular distinction is a result of a data-driven analysis.

In future research, it is likely that CA-oriented research will cast more light on these three characteristics of psychotherapeutic change and continue to provide a deeper understanding of the art of psychotherapy talk. More specifically, it will elucidate how realities are created and changed through talk; how the micro time of the sequential patterns connect with the macro time of topical threads and variation in action and emotion; and how the talking cure relates to the surrounding world and its objects, and yields measurable outcomes.

References


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