Towards an interactional approach to reflective practice in social work

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Abstract
Reflective practice in social work is subject to issues of memory and recall, meaning that reflection on the recollection of a case is likely to differ in important ways from the original instance. Giving an account of an event in discussion with peers or supervisors involves aspects of justification and self-presentation which thereby selectively emphasise and ignore details of the original event. We argue that reflective practice can be enhanced through drawing on audio and video recordings of the original events during a case which are then understood through the approaches of discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Engaging collaboratively with practitioners to explore these video recordings and their analysis has the potential to bring an interactionally informed perspective to reflective practice. The article begins by outlining some aspects of reflective practice and research on interaction, before describing a specific example of how interactional research was used within a knowledge exchange event, including the presentation of specific extracts, accompanied by an analysis and the knowledge exchange participants’ responses as well as their overall feedback on the event. It demonstrates the value of drawing on interactional research in the context of knowledge exchange with benefits for social work practice, theory and research.

Key words: reflective practice, interaction, knowledge exchange, discourse analysis, conversation analysis

Introduction
Reflective practice in social work is subject to issues of memory and recall, meaning that reflection on the recollection of a case is likely to differ in important ways from the original instance. Giving an account of an event in discussion with peers or supervisors involves aspects of justification and self-presentation which thereby selectively emphasise and ignore details of the original event. In this article, we argue that reflective practice can be enhanced through drawing on audio and video recordings of the original events during a case which are then understood through the approaches of discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Moreover, engaging collaboratively with practitioners to explore these video recordings and their analysis has the potential to bring an interactionally informed perspective to reflective practice. The article begins by outlining some aspects of reflective practice and research on interaction, before describing a specific example of how interactional research was used within a knowledge exchange event, including the presentation of specific extracts, accompanied by an analysis and the knowledge exchange participants’ responses as well as their overall feedback on the event.
Reflective practice

As explained by Askeland and Fook (2009), reflective practice examines professional practice with the intention of exposing gaps, problems and contradictions, for the purpose of improving practice. They suggest that critical reflection is an extension of this process, which aims for a deeper level of questioning of practitioners’ assumptions. It also draws explicitly on critical social theory for the purpose of analysing power relations and issues related to ideology. Reflective practice is a key aspect of much social work education; however, as highlighted by Wilson (2013), there is wide variation in how this is practised and its benefits to social work students. He also highlighted that, in agencies with a strong emphasis on procedures, reflective practice could become ‘routinised’, turning them into a ‘tick box’ exercise that held little value for the students. In social work education, Dempsey, Halton and Murphy (2001) outlined how reflective practice in social work education can be ‘scaffolded’ to assist students through the process, assisting them to become comfortable with self-reflection and bringing in aspects of role-play and ‘video work’, providing opportunities to explore communication skills, effective practice and the embodiment of values.

However, Brookfield (2009) has argued that not all reflective practice constitutes ‘critical reflection’. He suggests that critical reflection requires an engagement with critical social theory; it questions ideology and is inherently sceptical of capitalism. In this sense, then, ‘critical reflection’ involves more than discussing aspects of effective practice, and demands an interrogation of the role of ideology in practice. How might this be achieved? Ruch (2009) describes a relationship-based model of reflective practice, which involves a practitioner describing a practice situation to a small group of peers, allowing them to explore it in a tentative and ‘curious’ (rather than interrogative) manner, before the practitioner returns to the conversation to comment on the discussion. She suggests that the creation of a space for discussion allows the questioning of assumptions that would create ‘critical reflection’ and how practitioners actually present their case becomes part of the material for discussion. An alternative, or perhaps complementary approach, is to use video recordings of social workers’ interactions as a way of making visible assumptions, values and ideology as they relate to actual instances of practice. Moreover, this not simply limited to the ‘usual suspects’ of ideology and capitalism, but also brings attention to asymmetry in interaction and the uneven distribution of knowledge (e.g., ten Have, 1991; Robinson & Heritage, 2014), as well as the different social work paradigms that may be applied.

Research on interaction

Interaction between social workers, service users, family members, professionals and a range of other individuals is a core element of social work practice. Taking an interactional approach to the study of practice requires drawing on new methodological tools and analytical approaches. Discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA) are qualitative methods that are used to explore interactions as they unfold in real time (Wooffitt, 2005) drawing upon audio and video recordings and transcriptions of those interactions. In common with a number of other approaches in the social sciences, discourse analysis and conversation analysis treat language as actively constructing reality, rather than merely reflecting a pre-existing reality (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The type of discourse analysis we are referring to attends to the way that people ‘do’ things with words, including blaming, justifying and criticising. Conversation analysis is a more
bottom-up approach that focuses on both the organisation of action and analysis done by the participants in the original event. It looks at the way that people take turns, select next speakers, make or receive advice, produce or manage compliments and invitations (Liddicoat, 2011; ten Have, 2007).

DA and CA have been applied to a range of practice contexts, including: doctor-patient interactions (Heritage & Maynard, 2005); child protection help-lines (Butler, Potter, Danby, Emmison & Hepburn, 2010); police suspect interrogations (Stokoe & Edwards, 2008); neighbour mediation services (Stokoe, 2013a); and psychotherapy (Fitzgerald, 2013). There is a growing body of research that involves the analysis of interactions within social work services (e.g., Caswell, Eskelinen & Olesen, 2013; Hall, Juhila, Matarese & van Nijnatten, 2014; Juhila & Pöösö, 1999a, 1999b; Nijnatten, 2013; Räsänen, 2014). By analysing video or audio recordings of event as they happen this research has provided insights into the practices that constitute institutions, and how certain institutional practices work (and don’t work), as well as highlighting interactional obstacles to effective practice and how they may be overcome.

The analysis of actual instances of practice offers opportunities for both ‘reflective practice’ and ‘critical reflection’, examining practices to determine ‘better’ and ‘worse’ practices in order to improve service delivery, and analysing interactions to explore the way in which emancipatory policies may be stymied by local interactional requirements and power relations are made evident in particular encounters. For example, Robinson and Heritage (2014) illustrated how, in medical settings, paediatricians could use certain interactional styles that would increase parents’ acceptance of vaccines but result in lower levels of satisfaction, highlighting how practitioner goals can be achieved in ways that limit client autonomy and choice. Similarly, it allows for the examination of social work practices that are intended to increase service users’ participation in decision making, but may actually circumscribe such participation by the nature of the interaction (e.g., Hall & Moriss, 2014). What this approach provides is access to the local and actual instantiation of institutional practices, which allows us to move beyond abstract discussions of institutional principles. As we argued earlier it also provides an alternative access to the original events in social work cases than the ‘accounts of accounts’, which are inherent in interview-based research and some forms of reflective practice (see Hackett & Taylor, 2013).

**Interactional research and knowledge exchange**

Bringing the study of interaction into knowledge exchange activities has great potential, because it allows researchers and practitioners to explore practice collaboratively, building findings and recommendations from a joint analysis of the original events informed equally by DA/CA and the insider expertise of practitioners. Ideally then it really is an exchange of knowledge between conversation analysts learning from the practitioners’ understanding of the original events as well as insight from interactional analysis informing service provision. One recent and increasingly influential method of doing this is Professor Liz Stokoe’s Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM; Stokoe, 2014). It involves educating practitioners about the basics of conversation analysis, and playing extracts of recordings of real practitioner work, stopping them at key points so practitioners can explore the data and identify implications for practice. It has important differences from traditional role play which is beset by problems of changed stakes and the local performance of appropriate
actions in the role play itself (echoing the divide between the original events and the post hoc account of those events). CARM has been applied to police interviews and community mediation, leading to a better understanding of how to produce questions, avoid problematic responses, maintain neutrality and so on, which has then been used to train police officers and community mediators (Stokoe, 2013a, 2013b). In addition to its potential to improve understandings of practice among practitioners, knowledge exchange using CARM allows researchers an opportunity to reflect on their own analytic methods and check the validity of their findings (e.g., Juhila & Pösö, 1999a). The remainder of the article focuses on presenting a case study of a specific knowledge exchange event drawing on this approach.

The project

The knowledge exchange activities discussed below were based on the first author’s research project on criminal justice interventions. The research project involved the transcription and analysis of transcripts of video recordings of five routine sessions from two cognitive-behavioural groupwork programmes run by local authority criminal justice social work services in Scotland, addressing domestic abuse and sexual offending respectively. The research was approved by the university’s relevant ethics committee and by the ethical approval process within the local authorities. The service users and practitioners in the video recordings gave written consent to participate in the research.

There are two main traditions of research that focus on reductions of offending behaviour: 1) the ‘what works?’ movement, which tends to involve randomised control trials and meta-analysis to identify aspects and types of intervention that are most effective for reducing offending (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010); and 2) desistance research, which tends to use life-course methods and / or narrative interviews to explore the process by which people move away from offending behaviour (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1992; Maruna, 2001). However, very little research analyses interaction between criminal justice social workers and people receiving criminal justice interventions (for notable exceptions see, for example, Juhila & Pösö, 1999a, 1999b). The project’s aim, paralleling the ambitions of knowledge exchange which is the focus here, was to enhance our understanding of criminal justice practices and its relationship with desistance processes, as well as having scope to improve social work education and, here, reflective practice.

Structure of the knowledge exchange event

Drawing on the principles of CARM (Stokoe, 2014), the authors arranged a knowledge exchange seminar, taking place in Spring 2014, where 34 stakeholders – mostly criminal justice social workers – came together to discuss the methods and preliminary findings from the first author’s research project on criminal justice groupwork. The event was structured into three sections: 1) an introduction to conversation analysis and discourse analysis, with the presentation of some preliminary findings; 2) breakout sessions where small groups explored specific extracts from the data in detail, encouraged by a group facilitator; and 3) a plenary session at the end with the whole group for feeding back from the groups and wider discussion.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, the original video material could not be shown at the event. For this reason, actors were employed to re-enact extracts from the data, based on the
anonymised transcripts, which were video recorded in advance of the knowledge exchange event. Following the CARM process (Stokoe, 2014), the video clips were played with the transcript appearing at the appropriate times on the screen, and stopped at crucial moments. At these points, the event participants were asked questions such as: ‘What is going on here?’, ‘What might happen next?’ and ‘As a practitioner, what would you do next?’ The questions shifted the practitioners and researchers toward a close analysis of what was happening in the recording and an examination of their expectations of what certain actions would generate as likely next actions while also comparing them to their own interactional techniques for managing clients. Describing, anticipating and reflecting upon the complexities of actual events helped to make explicit key aspects of effective practice and encouraged reflection on the relationship between ideal practices and what is possible as events unfold.

Example analysis of social work practice

The following example draws on a video recording of a groupwork programme for addressing domestic abuse and was used in one of the breakout sessions at the event. The whole interaction was broken into four smaller extracts, as presented here, with discussions among the KE participants after each extract. The transcription symbols are explained in the appendix. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity. SW is the (female) social worker and Colin (C) is the (male) service user. Everyone but SW and C have left the room for a break, most of them smoking outside. Earlier in the session, C shared information about his physical abuse by his father when he was younger. SW is sitting with legs crossed, left arm on armrest, right elbow at knee, hand at mouth, looking at C. C is sitting with right leg on knee, arms crossed, looking off to right.

Extract 1

1. SW  ((shake of head, to C)) thanks for that, I didn’t expect you to share anything
2. SW  ((smiling)) (2.5) Colin
3. C   ((looks at SW)) (really?)
4. SW  I didn’t expect you to share anything, it was really brave
5.     (2.0)
6. C   I was only speaking the truth eh
7. SW  yeah

In the opening of this extract, we see that the social worker thanks the service user, compliments him and thereby reinforces his contributions of the group. In particular, the social worker constructs his contributions as positive through referencing her own expectations and suggesting that he surpassed these. The service user’s response could be seen as ‘resisting’ this evaluation (Juhila, Caswell & Raitakari, 2014), however from drawing on CA research on the giving and receiving of compliments (Pomerantz, 1978) we can understand that C’s downplaying of his actions is a conventional way of receiving praise that works toward portraying the speaker as modest. Moreover, stating ‘I was only speaking the truth’ presents his disclosure as factual rather than, say, being spoken in order to gain sympathy or in order to be seen as ‘brave’ in the way suggested by the social worker.

The KE event participants recognised the social worker’s behaviour as encouragement and positive reinforcement, which might encourage the service user to contribute to the group in future. They also recognised that the conversation was a sensitive one, and the worker may
wish to move closer to the service user as a way of acknowledging and dealing with the personal nature of the conversation. Nevertheless, from their experience, they also raised the difficulties of hearing the disclosure in its own terms or as instead a gambit of compliance in order to complete and be released from the groupwork.

Extract 2

8 (2.0)
9 SW ((big intake of breath, leans towards C, still seated on other side of room))
10 do you know what, see as a child ya cannae (.) do anything but see now (2.5)
11 no one can do that to you now (.) and this is [about
12 C I already know that but I think
13 it’s up to (.) the person who you’re close to and that
14 SW but you can change and that’s why you’re here
15 C I’ve already changed but that’s not the point (.) because the damage has still
16 been done (3.5) so I’m a write-off forever (.) it’s already (happened and it
17 shouldn’t’ve)

As anticipated by a number of the KE event participants, the social worker continued to show warmth and understanding through leaning further forward, closing some of the distance. She then talks in a general way about 'as a child ya cannae (.) do anything', which portrays the service user as not being responsible for what happened in this past, going on to suggest that people cannot affect him in this way any longer. The service user interrupts the social worker, and stating 'I already know that' works to stop the social worker's account, by suggesting her informing is redundant. The social worker however does not give up and changes tack slightly saying 'but you can change and that's why you're here', which does not deny the importance of the service user's childhood experiences nor their knowledge. In fact not only does the social worker emphasise the potential for positive change but uses a common technique of connecting a desire for change being made apparent by his presence in the groupwork programme. Once again, the local events are not so simple: by saying 'I've already changed', the service user is able to reject the social worker's positive point about his potential to change. Moreover, by emphasising the 'damage' that has been done (presumably from his offending behaviour), and using the phrase 'so I'm a write-off forever', the service user connects his offending behaviour with a permanent negative state.

The KE event participants noted that there seemed to be some disaffiliation or disconnect between the social worker and the service user in this section. However, it is worth noting that both people use the conjunction 'but' several times (lines 10, 12, 14, 15), which signals contrasting viewpoints without creating absolute disagreement, and in this sense perhaps suggests that rapport is being maintained even though they are putting forward slightly different arguments. Some of the event participants who were familiar with groupwork wondered whether time might be an issue here, as the other service users could return shortly from their break, so the social worker may wish to highlight the lack of time and find ways to contain the discussion or suggest it could continue at a time after the session. Returning to the initial conjecture that C might have been merely complying it also became more likely through following what actually happens that his disclosure was not for such tactical purposes.

Extract 3
but that's not who you are, that's just something you've done (. it's not who you are (. it's a behaviour (. it's not you try telling the polis that (. every time they turn up at the house [(unclear) they're still turning up all the time? aye (3.0) I'm sick of it

In this extract, the social worker differentiates between the service user's personhood and their past actions: 'but that's not who you are, that's just something you've done'. Such a construction allows the social worker to position the service user as not determined by their past actions. SW's re-formulates and thereby challenges the previous negative formulation of themselves by the service user, as permanently and unchangeably 'damaged', once again finding the positive response to his negative.

The social worker's ongoing attempt to reassure the service user is not disagreed with this time but turns instead to a different institutional agent reply – 'try telling the polis that'. In other words, while C does not directly contradict SW, he suggests that another agency, the police, do have that view of his character as forever marked by his actions. Referencing this external source, and particularly one of authority, functions to support the factuality of his troubles (Potter, 1996), while also complicating the social worker's affiliation (given they might be expected to show some alignment with the police). At this point the social worker shows her recall of his previous reported troubles with the police.

The KE participants recognised the extent to which the social worker's comments distinguished between the service user's nature and his behaviour, as a way of supporting the potential for change and SW's skill in linking this into the groupwork. They could also see the change in courses of action at lines 21 and 22 as the social worker shifted from motivational work to a response that might have been sympathy or might just be marking the police still visiting as 'news'. From their experience of similar situations, they again noted that this interaction was subject to time pressure, so the social worker may choose to offer options at this stage in terms of asking what the service user wanted to do, including taking some time out from the group.

Extract 4

(2.0)

24 SW ((looks down)) have you got fags, do you smoke?
25 C (. ((nods))
26 SW do you want a fag?
27 C to be honest money's that tight I've not got (fuck all ya know)
28 SW do you want one of these? ((picks up cigarettes and goes over to C))
29 C if ya dunnae mind, thanks
30 SW and there's one for later as well (. there (. for the next break
31 C ((gives two cigarettes to C))
32 thanks
33 SW you're welcome (. come on out, have time to get a fag ((both start walking outside, right of camera)) (. well done for sharing that
34 C like I said (. it's the truth eh

(2.0)
Following her change in footing, the social worker first asks ‘have you got fags’ and then repairs this to ‘do you smoke?’ While this orients to the fact that the other service users are currently outside smoking, it also solidifies the departure from formal groupwork to an offer of immediate and material consolation. ‘Do you want a fag?’ can be recognised as an offer here not of the ‘service’ but of a fellow human. The service user responds with a generalised comment about his financial situation, which continues the factual nature of his current suffering though now with a more accepting stance. Showing recognition of his plight, SW adds a further cigarette to her offer so that he is now someone that can join in with the smoking without having to beg a fag off one of the members of the group.

Having got a ‘thanks’ out of the user at line 33 she uses that as a way into congratulating him for ‘sharing’ personal information with the group. This can be seen as positive reinforcement (Trotter, 2009), and as construing his disclosure in a positive way, thereby also returning them to their institutional identities. As at the start of the interaction, the service user says ‘it’s the truth eh’, which works to downplay the value of his contribution while also emphasising its factuality (Edwards, 2007). The repetition here continues to mark that he was not ‘up to’ something by his disclosure. Through SW physically handing the cigarettes to C, she has greatly reduced the physical distance between them at the start of the extract, and they then exit the room together.

This was one of the parts where CARM came into its own because the participants did not anticipate this response on the part of the social worker, yet they were able to recognise how it functioned in the context of this interaction. In particular, they noted how it created a sense of togetherness or companionship for the social worker to share her personal supply of cigarettes with the service user. They also noted that there was an important symbolism in sharing the cigarettes and that it showed them interacting at a human level, as opposed to a merely professional or social worker-service user level. Drawing once again on their knowledge as social workers they also noted that this response served to shift the focus away from the substantive issue, about the service user’s disclosure of experiencing abuse, although it may have provided some ‘relief’ for the social worker and also dealt with the issue of time pressure. Of course, the extract only shows what happened in this particular extract, so the ways in which this was addressed later in the session or outside of the group are unavailable in this particular analysis.

Overall, focusing on this extract allowed a closer examination of actual practice than would be possible without the recordings or the use of conversation analysis and discourse analysis. A post hoc report might be that ‘the social worker recognised the significant disclosure made by the service user’. The careful and step-by-step analysis of the interaction makes it possible to be more specific about how such an event took place in practice, as well as demonstrating that the actual practices that accomplished the routine institutional tasks can be both surprising and understandable. Importantly, the focus was not on judging the social worker’s practice as good or bad, but rather using it as a starting point to understand the difficulties and subtleties of doing social work in the face of real (rather than role-playing) service users.

Although we are only touching on the complexities of groupwork within one short interaction, not least because this section was 1:1 rather than in the group, we have begun to
show how the analysis of recordings of real world social work can illuminate our understanding of the use of practice skills and explore their relationships with change processes. The analysis and discussion highlight a number of issues, including: how social workers make connections with service users through expressing warmth, understanding, positive reinforcement and sharing; separating out the person from the behaviour in order to encourage positive change; how ‘resistance’ can be understood in the context of interactions; the use of praise and how this may be received; and the role of physical space. Many other issues could also be explored. For instance, in terms of Brookfield’s (2009) comments about critical reflection, the references to finances here, and in other materials, could provide a resource for interrogating the role of financial precarity in relation to offending, desistance, and the social work role. Such an analysis may help to respecify the ways that social workers maintain and / or challenge ideological assumptions about offenders, domestic abuse and gender on the ground (Stokoe herself returns to these topics outside of her CARM work), with scope for considering critical and radical social work practices. The point is that an empirical and theoretically informed approach to reflective practice addresses some of the limitations of standard approaches, particularly around memory, recall and the problem of ‘accounts of accounts’, while providing a specificity about practice that makes abstract principles concrete and facilitates grounded critical analysis. The following feedback from participants at the event highlights some of the advantages of this approach.

*Feedback on the knowledge exchange event*

Twenty-two (65%) of the 34 participants at the event completed a short feedback questionnaire. First, participants were asked to rate the event out of ten. The participants’ answers ranged from 6 to 9, giving the event an average rating of 7.35, suggesting that overall they rated the event relatively highly. Open-ended responses provided further insight regarding the participants’ views on the event.

Several people commented on how they appreciated the chance to reflect on their practice. The seminar gave practitioners time and space to think about their professional interactions and discuss this with each other. Participants particularly appreciated the small groups because it gave a further chance for discussion and to look at the material in more detail. The opportunity to discuss real practice was found to be helpful:

> ‘The opportunity to reflect on our interactions; the skills, language and context of our work – good to share alternative perspectives.’

A number of participants commented on appreciating the variety of people who took part in the seminar. They appreciated having both researchers and practitioners take part in the event because they provide different perspectives in the discussions:

> ‘Chance to share knowledge with academics.’

> ‘The knowledge exchange between practitioners and researcher.’

Several of the participants said that they found learning about discourse analysis and conversational analysis helpful:
‘Discourse analysis as a tool to frame practice – close analysis can be very enlightening.’

Participants also appreciated the video being acted out and interacting with the material.

The purpose of using discourse analysis in this research was to learn from interactions rather than evaluate the practice or skills of the social workers running the group work being shown. This is particularly important to be aware of when the social workers who ran the group work being analysed attended the seminar. A couple of participants commented on the need to be sensitive to the social workers involved:

‘Need to be careful / sensitive of individual practitioners during feedback of analysis’

Future KE events for social workers beyond this preliminary study could use material where the original group would be unknown to the KE attendees.

There were a couple of comments expressing concern that looking at a small clip of group work can ignore the wider context of the work. This point was also expressed at the seminar. Understanding the wider context of situations was seen as vital for having an informed understanding of the interactions that were being analysed.

Many participants commented on how the seminar made them reflect on their own practice. A number of the participants felt that the knowledge gained on the methods of analysis used in this research would be useful for how they perceived and reflected on practice. Overall there was a clear sense that the learning that took place in the seminar enabled participants to consider the role of language and interactions:

‘Greater awareness of the importance of language and linguistics.’

‘Importance of attending to 'micro' processes as well as broader brush strokes... That the detail of how we respond as workers effects the way our clients respond.’

‘A closer insight of how discourse analysis could be helpful for improving reflexivity practices in social work.’

The seminar allowed many of the participants to be introduced to the concepts of discourse analysis and conversational analysis for the first time and there was an interest in learning more about them:

‘An interest in finding out more about types of conversational analysis discussed.’

There were a range of different ideas about how the research could be developed. Many of the participants felt that the research could be developed to improve practitioners' skills and for group work training. Several participants said that it could be used to encourage reflective practice. A number of participants felt that service users' perspectives should be incorporated
into the research. Additionally, there were a couple of comments suggesting that the longer term outcomes for service users could be explored:

‘1:1 case supervision could offer further fascinating insights to the social worker/service user interaction/relationship.’

‘Service user perspective of what was helpful/meaningful for them.’

‘Development of ‘tools’ to take home for practitioners.’

Overall, the seminar allowed participants to meet together and discuss group work practice from a different perspective. The participants showed a real interest in the research being presented to them and particularly the role of discourse and conversational analysis. Many of the participants said that it gave them a chance to reflect on their own practice, and particularly consider the role of language and interactions. There were a number of different ideas of how the research could be developed further and the view expressed that the research has great potential to positively impact practice.

For the facilitators, the sessions highlighted how practitioners orient to a range of concerns in groupwork, including encouraging participation, reinforcing pro-social behaviour, conveying empathy, dealing with tricky/unhelpful contributions, drawing out and relating contributions to other service users, consolidating learning, and dealing with time constraints, often in subtle and highly skilled ways. It was particularly interesting to note the way that some participants at the event could predict what might happen next – including predicting changes in body language and things that would provoke laughter – as well as those moments that departed from expectations. The event gave insight into how practitioners convert principles for effective practice into actual instances of interaction, and the direct engagement of practitioners provided context and a level of understanding of practice that otherwise might not be available to the researchers.

Discussion

Taking an interactional approach to reflective practice and knowledge exchange, through drawing on theoretical and analytical insights from conversation analysis and discourse analysis, provides opportunities for enhancing social work practice, theory and research. In terms of practice, it provides a grounding in ‘real’ instances of interaction, approached within a theoretical framework, that should facilitate both ‘reflective practice’, in the sense of considering better and worse ways of engaging with service users, and ‘critical reflection’ (Brookfield, 2009; Ruch, 2009), in terms of questioning some of the assumptions that underpin and are evident in practice. Theoretically, it facilitates an understanding of practice that is grounded in instances of interaction, meaning it is one step less removed than understandings based on post-hoc interviews with practitioners. In relation to social work research, exploring practice through drawing on discourse analysis and conversation analysis provides clear frameworks for analysing data, and the engagement with practitioners through knowledge exchange allows observations and conclusions to be validated and discussed.

Drew, Toerien, Irvine and Sainsbury (2014, p. 315) have highlighted some of the key advantages to this way of using conversation analysis (CA):
CA does not rely on “mediated” versions of what happened or on accounts that are shaped by participants’ memories or their normative expectations. CA is a form of natural history of social interaction, documenting what happens, and uncovering the practices that underlie what happens. It may turn out that just that—the documentation of practice—can be uncomfortable or even controversial for certain organizations.

As they suggest, it has a number of advantages over approaches to practice and research that rely on post-hoc accounts of events, including reflective practices that involve practitioners giving accounts of particular cases and discussing them with peers (e.g., Ruch, 2009). Moreover, Stokoe (2013b, 2014) has illustrated and argued that CARM has advantages over traditional uses of role-plays in training contexts, such as that used in social work education (e.g., Dempsey et al., 2001). However, as some of the feedback from our knowledge exchange participants highlighted, there may be sensitivities around analysing practice where practitioners from the organisation under scrutiny, or indeed the specific practitioners themselves, are present – particularly as the brief instances of interaction that are analysed may be taken out of context or be unrepresentative of wider practices. In these cases in particular, further work may need to be done in order to create the ‘safe space’ (Ruch, 2009) for such activities.

Overall, this approach offers one way of bringing together social work practice and research in a way that is mutually beneficial and grounded both in actual practice and established methodological and analytical traditions. Future directions include undertaking systematic studies of social work interaction (e.g., Hall et al., 2014), potentially within the context of social work education or skills training, in order to better understand and develop effective practice. The approach also has potential for enhancing action research and evaluation projects, as a way of exploring practice and facilitating practitioners to engage with their own practices and make the implicit explicit. Moreover, it could also help to build upon reflective practices as they currently exist within social work services, including those that routinely draw upon recordings of their own practice for developmental and quality assurance purposes. All of these could assist with the development of effective tools for training and reflection within social work. Creating an interactional approach to reflective practice, and a reflective approach to interactional research, through knowledge exchange, has the potential to greatly enhance both activities.

References


Appendix: Transcription symbols

These symbols have been adapted from Jefferson (2004).

[ ] Square brackets indicate overlapping speech. They are placed to indicate the position of the overlap.

(0.8) Numbers in round brackets indicate pauses in seconds (in this case, eight-tenths of a second).

(.) A full stop in rounded brackets indicates a micro pause (that is, a pause that is too short to time).

((name)) Double rounded brackets indicate actions or otherwise include notes from the transcriber.

(unclear) Words in single brackets are unclear or indicate a ‘best guess’.

yeah? Question marks indicate a ‘questioning’ (i.e., rising) intonation.