

“Asking for caller’s ethnicity: Strategies for success”

PLEASE NOTE: This working paper is a live document intended to inform and stimulate discussion and debate within the partner organisations involved in this specific research project, but also to contribute to a wider conversation involving academic and police related colleagues. PLEASE DO contact us if you have any comments or questions or would like to discuss the ideas in this presentation further: Please contact the lead author – Dr Alexandra Kent. - A.Kent@keele.ac.uk

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Keele & Staffordshire Universities Police Knowledge Fund Discussion and Policy Documents

This poster is one of a series of outputs published in open access format by members of the joint academic research team from Keele and Staffordshire Universities as part of a broader research project - Developing an Action/Work-based learning system for improved knowledge exchange, development and implementations through partnership working (Project code J11).

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This series of discussion and policy documents and presentation slides is intended to inform and stimulate discussion and debate within the partner organisations involved in this specific research project, but also to contribute to a wider conversation involving academic and police related colleagues. The views expressed in these documents are those of the individual authors and should not be regarded as representative of the views or official policies of any of the Police or related agencies that have collaborated in our research.

These documents regularly draw on research and evaluation of procedures and practices in a range of Police Forces, Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners and related partner agencies. While the project that has stimulated these documents was initially formulated in partnership with particular Police and related agencies and organisations, it should not be assumed or inferred that the discussion contained in these documents specifically relates to these partners, their policies or practices.

These documents are intended to be accessible to non-academic readers, and to provide an overview of a range of ideas, concepts and outputs from our research. We want these documents to stimulate debate and develop further knowledge exchange and production with a wider range of potential partners. If you have any comments or questions or would like to discuss the ideas in this document further, please feel free to contact the project lead cited on the title page.



Context and Rationale for this Presentation

‘Calling for Help: Assessing and improving the effectiveness of communication during calls to the police’

This presentation relates to early outcomes from a project working with 999/101 call handlers to explore interactions between call handlers and members of the public who have called these services. The issues of potential mis-communications in interactions between police call handlers and members of the public who ring 999/101 have been flagged up in discussions within our partnership, not least in the context of ongoing reviews of the 999/101 service, several critical practice reviews, a recent Domestic Homicide Review and a related IPCC investigation. Specialist academic colleagues have been working with call staff to identify and address these underlying issues.

Outcomes to date (Revised February 2017). It can be useful to think of a conversation in terms of a racetrack. You start at the beginning with the caller and along the way you complete various projects. You anticipate and avoid hurdles or you construct hurdles that can knock the interaction off course and prevent you reaching the finish line successfully. This ‘Test Bed’ project has mapped out the conversational ‘racetrack’ of a total of 501 999 and 101 calls to date and fed this analysis into a series of Knowledge Exchange Groups (KEGs) with key staff to help call handlers identify what sorts of problems and roadblocks can occur in conversation, as well as the techniques and strategies that best resolve these problems.

Significant progress has been made with the analysis of the call recordings. The team have been focusing on developing collections of call extracts that it will be most useful for the call handlers to look at during KEGs and training. In addition to the complete detailed call transcripts, we now have collections of:

- 149 examples of opening requests for help
- 35 examples of call handlers asking callers for their ethnicity
- 33 examples where the call handler declines to provide the assistance requested by the caller (either because it is not a policeable matter or because a different response will be provided)
- 8 examples of either particularly clear explanations of what will happen next or where the caller queries this
- 25 examples of where the action of completing the computer log interferes with the verbal communication within the calls
- 19 examples of call handlers addressing issues of vulnerability in the call or log
- 27 examples of calls involving individual with mental health concerns
- 37 examples of calls involving domestic incidents
- 6 examples of 999 callers being told to call back on 101

The team is continuing to build these collections for use in the upcoming KEGs and in training of new staff. Various formats for the KEGs have been trialled over the course of the Project to explore the most effective approach to sharing knowledge. This has included:

Shift-based workshops - focused on exploring the landscape of 999 and 101 calls and encouraging call handlers to become analysts of their practice.

Cohort training working with small groups of new call handlers during their initial training. These KEGs focused on helping them retain an appreciation of the caller’s perspective, particularly when informing them that it is not appropriate for the police to respond to their request for assistance in the manner they have sought.

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Managers Discussion KEGs

- Vulnerabilities. – The team has conducted work with managers on the issue of vulnerabilities. This resulted in tangible recommendations that have subsequently been submitted as a report to the Head of Contact Services
- Call Resolution. – The team has conducted work with managers on the issue of call resolution. This resulted in the managers resolving to change some aspects of how they advise and support the call handlers on their shifts. It also helped to inform and focus my subsequent analysis of how call handlers can effectively close down calls for which no police response will be provided.

Work Shadowing - Team members have observed call handlers during night shifts (10pm-7am) and evening shifts (3pm-10pm) to explore the situated experience of their work environment. During these shadowed shifts the researchers were able to discuss with several call handlers issues relating to their call handling practices and explore the rationale behind their choices during a call. The researchers also observed how the computer system both facilitates and impedes the call handlers’ effectiveness.

Asking for caller's ethnicity: Strategies for success

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Introduction

Emergency calls are specialised form of communication (Wakin & Zimmerman, 1999), where efficient and effective communication can sometimes mean the difference between life and death for the callers. The findings reported here form part of a larger on-going research project examining moments of interactional difficulty within emergency (999) and non-emergency (101) police calls. The aim of the overall research project is to develop recommendations to facilitate smoother and more effective communication during these potentially life altering phone calls.

Previous work has shown how calls to emergency services are organised around the central actions of the caller requesting help and the call handler deciding what help (if any) to provide (Larsen, 2013; Drew & Walker, 2010). In this context, asking for a caller's ethnic identity is not as obviously relevant to the business of providing help as other questions (such as "Where are you?") might be.

In this poster we present the findings from our analysis of occasions when callers were asked to provide information about their ethnicity. This moment in the interaction often proved problematic and caused disruption and discord within the interaction. The aim of our analysis was to identify features of the interaction that are the most effective at streamlining and progressing the conversation, instead of generating trouble and delays.

Data Collection

The primary data for this project are a corpus of recordings of real calls received by a regional UK police force. Our analysis of the police calls is supported by a small comparison dataset of calls requesting immediate assistance that were received by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Both datasets were collected following ethical approval from Keele University and are covered by appropriate Data Processing Agreements between the organisations and the researchers.

Across both data sets the purpose of the interaction is for the caller to seek help from the service and for the call handler to gather information about the incident and decide on the appropriate response from their organisation. In total 93 Police calls and 12 NSPCC calls have been collected so far.

Analytic Procedure

1. All data were anonymised when first submitted to the researchers.
2. Basic (verbatim) transcripts of all calls were produced of all the calls.
3. Reading and listening to the data helped to generate specific data-driven research questions for us to focus on.

When we began to analyse the calls it quickly became apparent that of all the personal information questions asked by call handlers, ethnicity appeared to be the one that caused consistent problems. At this point 'the ethnicity question' became a key analytic focus for the first author's BPS Research Assistantship.

4. Relevant extracts from the data were then transcribed according to the Jefferson (2004) conventions. The caller was asked to provide their ethnicity in 16% (15 of 93) of the police calls and 66% (8 of 12) of the NSPCC calls.
5. The transcripts were analysed using conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2012).

Analysis - Awkward moments

When asking 'the ethnicity question' call handlers often included prefaces, hesitations or repair that indicated they viewed the question itself as problematic or inapposite (c.f Stokoe & Edwards, 2008).

Use of the terms "ethnicity" or "ethnic origin" often caused misunderstandings or confusion. The question risks positioning the caller as ignorant or failing to hold up their end of the conversation if they don't understand what it means. Extract 1 is an example of the awkwardness present around asking 'the ethnicity question'.

Extract 1: 011_0.47

01 HANDLER: .hhh erm. (.) we do ask our call:ers (.) to
 02 provide their ethnicity **is that something**
 03 **that you're willing to: tell me:?**
 04 (.)
 05 CALLER: **whas a: mean.**
 06 HANDLER: .hh so whether you identify yourself as **white**
 07 **british [or some other ethnic-**
 08 CALLER: **[ah: white british yeah(h) s(h)orry]**
 09 >abouttha<
 10 HANDLER: uh [no that's fine.]
 11 CALLER: **[I'm not too bright (.) sorry ab]outha.**
 12 (2.9)
 13 HANDLER: so white British

Hesitant delivery (points to 'erm.')

Highlights that the caller may not want to provide the information (points to 'is that something that you're willing to: tell me:?')

Caller does not understand the question (points to 'whas a: mean.')

Caller insults their own intelligence and apologises (points to '[I'm not too bright (.) sorry ab]outha.')

Use of 'White British' example enables caller to confirm their ethnicity (points to '[ah: white british yeah(h) s(h)orry]')

Analysis – Confirmations are easier

Avoiding technical language by asking the caller to confirm a candidate ethnicity was more often successful at generating swift simple agreements particularly when it occurred during an extended sequence of personal information gathering (name, address, contact details, etc...). Extract 2 is a much shorter, less troublesome exchange.

Extract 2: 062_3:45

01 HANDLER: **er >are yu white British< Dawn are you.**
 02 (0.2)
 03 CALLER: **yeah: yeah.**
 04 HANDLER: >tha:nks fur tha<.

No hesitation or doubting the caller's willingness to answer (points to 'er >are yu white British<')

Quick confirmation, no confusion (points to 'yeah: yeah.')

Analysis – Shared ethnic identities

Call handlers often used their personal ethnicity as an example (e.g., Extract 3). This formulation was typically successful at eliciting answers from callers. However, it makes it possible for a shared social identity to be constructed between caller and call handler when they both claim the same ethnicity. It can act as a means for building common ground with callers. This could be a useful tool for developing rapport but should be avoided if the call handler is attempting to maintain their neutrality and avoid sounding 'on the caller's side'. In Extract 3 we see the call handler working to retrospectively dismiss the shared social identity that had been inadvertently created with the caller.

Retrospective justifications for 'the ethnicity question' were more likely to occur when either the question or answer had proved troublesome. The explanations are often lacking fluency and littered with hesitations and repairs. This provides further evidence that call handlers find 'the ethnicity question' to be problematic.

Extract 3: 019_2:01

01 HANDLER: An:d (0.6) >I des:cri:be< my:self >as bein<
 02 white british:, ow would you des:cri:be
 03 [your:self in those terms.]=
 04 CALLER: [**yeah I'm white too**]
 05 HANDLER: =the same
 06 CALLER: [Yeh.]
 07 HANDLER: [Thank] you?
 08 .hhh >Not that i' makes< any dhif:f:erence
 09 (.) bhut whe hafe to jhus recor::d it

Caller confirms they 'too' are white. Call handler confirms both share membership of the same social group (points to 'yeah I'm white too')

=the same (points to '=the same')

Call handler works to downplay the significance of their shared identity by claiming it is inconsequential. (points to '.hhh >Not that i' makes< any dhif:f:erence')

Discussion

Overall the analysis shows that 'the ethnicity question' is often problematic for both Police and NSPCC call handlers. Our analysis reveals that:

- a) Call handlers should avoid prospectively signalling that 'the ethnicity question' is problematic. Instead it's better to locate the question within a sequence of personal information questions. However, call handlers should also be able to articulate why the information is required if the caller challenges the relevance of the question.
- b) The terms ethnicity, ethnic origin and ethnic background are particularly problematic and should be avoided. In addition to causing confusion for the caller, these formulations often elicited more information disregarded by the call handlers, which may lengthen a call and delay response times.
- c) Requesting confirmation of a candidate ethnicity (e.g., "Are you white british?") makes it easier for callers to answer the question. These exchanges were typically shorter and smoother. They were associated with fewer misunderstandings and confusions during the interaction.
- d) Personal examples can generate a shared social identity and therefore need to be used selectively in environments where the call handler is seeking to generate rapport.

The findings have already been used as part of training workshops for Police call handlers. It is likely that the awkwardness of 'the ethnicity question' is common to helpline operators in other organisations where this information is gathered. The findings therefore are likely to have broader applied relevance.

Caution is needed when applying or generalising these preliminary findings. In our collection we had no examples where the caller did not confirm the candidate identity offered by the call handler. Neither did we have any examples where the personal ethnic identity offered by the call handler differed from that confirmed by the caller.

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