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What is This?

'Natural' and 'contrived' data: a sustainable distinction?

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Introduction: context and 'bias' in research

One of the most consistent and (for some) troubling findings of mainstream social scientific research, is that the context in which a research project takes place has a significant effect on the behaviour of respondents and the overall quality of the data (Banyard and Hunt, 2000; Schuman and Presser, 1996). Researchers working within both positivist and interpretative paradigms, for example, worry that their data collection techniques are not wholly neutral or objective instruments, and that there are numerous potential sources of 'bias' (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997) which may lead to invalid and erroneous results ('researcher effects', 'reactivity', 'context effects', 'observer effects', and so on). Because they represent a source of error, these effects are treated as problems which must be overcome by improving the research instrument or by taking 'proper methodological precautions' (p. 11). Books on interview methodology, for example, often advise researchers to minimize the 'intrusive' effects of a variety of interactional and contextual features. Some frequently recommended 'techniques' include taking time to build up a rapport with respondents, allowing for acclimatization periods (such that the researcher and his or her tools can 'blend' with the setting), dressing in a way that is not intimidating, learning about techniques to broach sensitive topics, being non-directive, and so on (see Judd et al., 1991). Thus, the primary aim is to eliminate extraneous, research-induced 'contaminants' and uncover some more 'pristine' reality.

One of the distinguishing features of discursive and conversation analytic (CA) approaches, by contrast, is their emphasis on the action orientation of talk, and the local, or 'endogenous' production of context (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Schegloff, 1997a; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Since these approaches treat respondents, not as passive containers of knowledge, but as active participants within the research process who *construct,* rather than *report on* reality, 'bias' is regarded as both unavoidable and pervasive. Research contexts are thoroughly social, interactional occasions, and it is for this reason that, as Holstein

and Gubrium (1997) point out, '"contamination" is everywhere' (p. 126). The concern about bias can only be sustained 'if one takes a narrow view of interpretative practice and meaning construction' (p. 126). Thus, attempts to control bias may not only be futile, but may stifle the very features of interaction that are theoretically interesting.

Suchman and Jordan's (1990) CA study of the survey interview highlights precisely this point. They argue that the survey interview has features that rely on, but also suppress 'crucial elements of ordinary conversation' (p. 232). This 'injunction against interaction', means that features of conversation typically used to establish shared understanding, and which are 'essential to successful communication' (recipient design, the redesign of questions, and the detection and repair of misunderstanding, for example), are 'effectively prohibited' by the survey's rather sterile, stimulus-response format (p. 233). Consequently, they suggest, the validity of the survey instrument is undermined.

The discursive psychologists, Potter and Wetherell (1995) express similar concerns in their argument about the 'got-up' materials commonly collected by social psychologists. They argue that the studies based on such materials 'ride roughshod' over the contextual details of interaction 'and damage the possibility of using the turn-by-turn displays of understanding and repair that have been exploited so effectively by conversation analysts' (pp. 218–19; see also Potter, 1997: 149). For discursive and CA researchers, the interview, for example, is a piece of interaction, not a neutral resource for a social science investigation (Mishler, 1986). In the interview, meaning is constructed jointly, by both interviewer and interviewee, and the interaction's status *as* an interview is a turn-by-turn accomplishment. Therefore, however hard one might try, the interview is not a standard*ized* or standard*izable* instrument.

In discursive and CA research, the focus thus shifts from seeing traditional social scientific research methods as fairly neutral mechanisms that can be used to collect people's views and opinions – 'a machinery for harvesting data from respondents' (Potter, 1997: 149) – to pieces of interaction in their own right (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). In this sense, the 'method' is not a reified, standardized *resource* to get at something *separate* from it (data), but constitutes its very object, and the interaction embodied within it (see Baker, 1997). Once methods such as interviews are treated in this way, suggest Potter and Wetherell (1995), 'the standard injunction to be as neutral and uninvolved as possible becomes highly problematic. It only makes sense as part of the fiction that the researcher can somehow disappear from the interaction by being passive enough' (p. 218; see also Potter, 1997: 149).

So, bias in interviews (and in other data collection methods) need not be regarded as a problem, but can be 'turned on its head' and celebrated. Interviewers can be active participants, arguing with members, and questioning their assumptions, just as participants can 'turn the tables' on researchers, prompting them to explain their questions and offer opinions. By conducting research in this way, one is able to get at a wider range of accounting practices

(Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 164; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Potter, in press), and the traditional distinction between researcher (as active questioner), and participant (as comparatively passive respondent) becomes blurred. From this perspective then, 'bias' (and 'context effects' more generally) is both unavoidable *and* theoretically interesting.

Indeed, by turning what is commonly regarded as a 'resource' (albeit an inherently flawed one) into a 'topic', an increasing number of researchers using discursive psychology and CA have been able to show how 'survey talk' (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000), 'interview talk' (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995) and 'focus group talk' (Puchta and Potter, 1999, in press) gets done, identifying features which distinguish it from 'mundane conversation'. In all such studies the researcher is thought of – not as a potential 'contaminant' – but as much a 'member' as the other participants, and of equal status for the purposes of analysis.

Despite their reservations about the necessity and/or desirability of the elimination of bias and context effects from research, however, discursive psychologists and conversation analysts continue to advocate a distinction between: (i) 'naturally occurring', 'natural' or 'naturalistic' data; and (ii) 'non-naturally occurring', 'researcher-provoked', 'artificial', or 'contrived' data,[1] arguing that the former are somehow qualitatively different from, preferable to, and/or 'better' (for the purposes of analysis) than the latter (see Heritage, 1984: 234ff, 1988; Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 2–5; Potter and Wetherell, 1995; Ten Have, 1999: 48ff; Silverman, 2001: 159ff; Potter, in press).

In this paper, I outline the contours of this distinction, and problematize some of the assumptions underlying it. I argue that, from a discursive and CA perspective, it actually makes little theoretical or practical sense to map the natural/contrived distinction onto discrete 'types' of data. What are natural data and what are not is not decidable on the basis of their type and/or the role of the researcher within the data. Rather, the status of pieces of data as natural or not depends largely on what the researcher intends to 'do' with them. While many discursive and CA researchers recognize this, and treat (purportedly 'contrived') data from surveys, interviews and focus groups as natural for certain purposes, they nonetheless import notions of what data *types* are 'natural' and 'non-natural' into descriptions of their 'favoured' materials (and, in the case of CA, into *definitions* of CA). This as yet untheorized inconsistency, is, I suggest, rather confusing and unhelpful, and needs to be exposed and attended to if we are to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between method, context and data.

Natural and contrived data

Conversation analysts have always expressed a preference for working with 'naturally occurring' data. In one of their earliest papers, for example, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) note that 'the materials with which we have worked are audiotapes

and transcripts of *naturally occurring interactions'* (p. 291, emphasis added). Indeed, the term has become a slogan built into many *definitions* of CA. According to Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998), for example, CA is 'the study of *recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction'* (p. 14, emphasis in original). Others such as Heritage and Atkinson (1984) note that 'within conversation analysis there is an insistence on the use of materials collected from *naturally occurring* occasions of everyday interaction' (p. 2, emphasis in original), while Psathas (1995), remarks that 'data may be obtained from any available source, the only requirements being that these should be *naturally occurring'* (p. 45, emphasis added).

A variety of terms have been used alongside, and interchangeably with, references to 'naturally occurring' talk. So, for Ten Have (1999) 'it is essential for the CA enterprise to study recordings of *natural human interaction*' (p. 47, emphasis added), and that these recordings 'should catch "*natural interaction*" as fully and faithfully as is practically possible' (p. 48, emphasis added). Others work with '*natural conversation*' (Sacks et al., 1974: 698); 'natural conversational materials' (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 291); 'actual happenings' (Sacks, 1995[1992], Vol. 2: 26); 'actual utterances in actual ordinary conversations' (Schegloff, 1988: 61); and, 'actually occurring data' (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: 18).

Here the 'natural' or 'actual' is implicitly or explicitly contrasted with data that are 'non-natural', 'contrived' or 'researcher-provoked'. So, for Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998), 'naturally occurring' refers to recorded interactions 'situated as far as possible in the ordinary unfolding of people's lives, as opposed to being pre-arranged or set up in laboratories' (p. 14). While naturally occurring data involve 'real interests, investments, interactional trajectories' which 'are at stake and serve as formative context' (Schegloff, 1998: 247), non-natural data 'would not exist apart from the researcher's intervention' (Silverman, 2001: 159). There appears to be a consensus amongst conversation analysts on this issue. According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), for example, natural interaction is 'not produced by research intervention' (p. 291). For Ten Have (1999) it is not 'co-produced with or provoked by the researcher' (p. 48), while for Heritage (1988) the materials are 'as uncontaminated as possible by social scientific intervention' (p. 130).[2] As Ten Have (1999) notes, 'the ideal is to (mechanically) observe interactions as they would take place without research observation' (p. 49). Drew (1989) goes even further, arguing that the data must not have been 'produced for the purpose of study', or collected 'for any pre-formulated investigative or research purposes' (p. 96).

Heritage (1984) notes that CA's 'insistence' on the use of naturally occurring data is matched by an avoidance of data sources that are deemed 'unsatisfactory' (p. 236). These include data from interviews, where participants' reports of events are treated as an 'appropriate substitute' for a recording of the actual events; experiments, which involve the 'direction or manipulation of behaviour'; observational methods, where data are recorded in field notes or using pre-coded schemas; and invented data (sentences, speech acts or exemplar

dialogues) based on intuition or 'idealizations about how interactions work' (Heritage, 1984: 236; see also, Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 2–5, Ten Have, 1999: 53–4).

For some conversation analysts, underlying the distinction between natural and non-natural data types is Sacks' (1987) argument that 'sequences are the most natural sorts of objects to be studying' (p. 54). According to Sacks (1995[1992], Vol. 2), researchers do not 'have a strong intuition for sequencing in conversation' (p. 5). If the researcher wants to understand how talk works, and not obscure members' (sequentially organized) procedures for producing orderly social interaction, it therefore makes sense to focus on 'the actual details of actual events' (p. 26) and avoid the decontextualized kinds of data; the 'hypotheticalized, proposedly typicalized versions of the world' (Sacks, 1984: 25) typically used in linguistic and philosophical approaches to language (see also Schegloff, 1988).[3]

While their overall project is a rather different one, discursive psychologists conceive of the natural/contrived distinction in strikingly similar terms. Potter (1997), for example, argues that 'naturally occurring talk' is talk 'produced entirely independently of the actions of the researcher' (p. 148; see also Potter, 1996: 135). As Potter says, 'the test is whether the interaction would have taken place, and would have taken place in the form that it did, had the researcher not been born' (p. 135; Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 162). It must, in other words, pass the 'dead social scientist test': the interaction must have taken place even 'if the researcher got run over on the way to the university that morning' (Potter, in press). From this perspective, doctor–patient interaction, courtroom trials, calls to the police, business meetings, talk in the classroom, and conversations between friends are all 'natural' (Potter, 1997: 148–9, in press).

Non-natural data, by contrast, are data that have been 'got up' by the researcher using an interview, an experiment, or a survey questionnaire (Potter, 1997: 149). As Potter notes, the interview, for example, 'is contrived; it is subject to powerful expectations about social science research fielded by participants; and there are particular difficulties in extrapolating from interview talk to activities in other settings' (p. 150). In the future, Potter (in press) suggests it is likely that the use of 'naturalistic materials' will become more common 'and interviews and focus groups will be mainly an adjunct to those naturalistic studies'.[4] This is not least because 'the interaction in interviews and focus groups are flooded by the expectations and categories of social science agendas' (in press, 1996: 135).

Thus, discursive psychologists conceive of the natural/contrived distinction in terms of a continuum: at one end of the natural/contrived data continuum, there is research with a high level of researcher involvement, which is not very natural at all, and at the other end there are 'very natural' studies, where the interaction is accomplished with no researcher involvement (Potter and Wetherell, 1995: 216–17).

So, for both discourse and conversation analysts the 'naturalness' of a piece

of data can be decided on the basis of the method used to collect it, and, more specifically, the degree of researcher involvement and/or social scientific 'intervention' within it.

What is unclear, however, is how the natural/contrived distinction can be sustained in light of the arguments about bias and context mentioned earlier. The discursive and CA approach to context has undermined the idea that interactional or contextual features of our data collection procedures are necessarily problematic. Indeed, it is argued that attempts to control or minimize bias actually stifle the thoroughly social, contextual features of interaction to which we wish to gain access. Thus, there is a potentially contradictory tension here: on the one hand, discursive psychologists and conversation analysts argue that bias in the form of 'context effects' is not a problem, but a feature of *all* interaction, which can be celebrated and explored, and, on the other hand, that naturally occurring talk is 'better' than contrived materials, or more amenable to analysis, because it would have happened 'had the researcher not been born'. In this sense, then, the researcher is deemed to be a potentially biasing or contaminating force.

One problem with this, of course, is that all data must be recorded, and in order to do this (or use tapes recorded by others), one must first obtain the '*informed* consent' of participants. This ethical requirement, along with the very presence of a tape-recorder, makes it hard to see how *any* data could be collected had the researcher 'not been born', and without the express knowledge of the participants. From this perspective, then, *all* data are researcher-prompted and thus contrived.

Conversation analysts themselves suggest that the natural/contrived distinction is rather crude. Ten Have (1999), for example, notes that 'in many cases, there does not seem to be a sharp line separating "naturally occurring" from "experimental" data (in the broad sense of "researcher-produced")' (p. 49). He suggests instead that 'whether some piece of talk can be treated as "natural" or not depends not only on its setting, but also on the way that it is being analysed' (p. 49). Likewise, Silverman (2001) argues that since 'no data are ever untouched by human hands', 'the opposition between naturally occurring and researcher provoked data should not be taken too far' (p. 159). Certainly, he says 'we should treat appeals to "nature" (as in the term "naturally occurring") with considerable caution' (p. 159).

Indeed, conversation analysts use purportedly contrived, researcher-prompted data from social scientific sources all the time, indicating that perhaps their choice of data is not driven by a theory of natural and non-natural 'types' – defined in terms of the role of the researcher in the data – at all.[5] In their well-known laboratory study, for example, the conversation analysts West and Zimmerman (1983) explored the pattern of interruptions between previously unacquainted men and women.[6] Likewise, Schegloff (1991) notes that we *can* use CA to study interaction within an experimental set-up, but only while recognizing that it is a set-up and that it occurs within a particular institutional

framework and associated speech-exchange system that may or may not be consequential for 'accessing' one's topic.

Even where they do not use such 'contrived' data, there is reason to believe that much of the material conversation analysts *present* as natural is, in fact, researcher-prompted. Schegloff's papers frequently include extracts headed 'Chicken Dinner' (1997a: 181), 'Family Dinner' (1997b: 518), and 'Kraus Dinner' (1992: 1323) – though the precise role of the researcher in such discussions is rarely, if ever, commented upon or given any reflexive treatment.

The discursive psychologists Potter and Wetherell (1995) have begun to problematize what exactly we mean by 'natural language' (p. 216), and what status we should give to 'naturally occurring' talk (see Potter, 1997). Potter warns, 'we should be wary of accepting too readily assumptions about what kinds of talk are natural and what are not' (p. 149). For example the natural/contrived continuum implies that interaction in research settings is 'rather ephemeral or is not genuine' (Potter and Wetherell, 1995: 217). Potter and Wetherell stress instead, that 'what is going on is indeed genuine; it is genuine interaction in a laboratory' (p. 217). Accordingly, they assert 'natural language' is *not* a type of data (p. 218), or a 'straightforward discovered object' (Potter, 1997: 149) but is 'a theoretical and analytic stance on conversational interaction' (p. 149). It is, in other words, a 'construction' as opposed to a 'thing'.

While both discourse and conversation analysts have suggested that natural data are not necessarily *types* of data, and imply that research intervention should not always be deemed a contaminating force, they do not follow through this argument consistently, and instead fall back on the idea that certain *types* of data are natural and others are not, and that the role of the researcher is central to that distinction.

For example, despite their seemingly pervasive use of purportedly 'contrived' data, conversation analysts continue to note that 'it can still be helpful to make use of the distinction between *two kinds of data*: naturally occurring and researcher-provoked' (Silverman, 2001: 159, my emphasis).[7] Others such as Heritage (1984: 234ff, 1988), Heritage and Atkinson (1984: 2–5), Ten Have (1999: 48ff), and Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 14) persist in building into definitions and descriptions of CA and its preferred data sources, a notion of what types of data are 'naturally occurring' and what are not.

Likewise, despite their expressed reservations about referring to 'types' of talk, Potter (1996) notes that discursive psychologists are turning away from interviews towards more 'naturalistic' data sources (p. 135), in order 'to focus on materials less affected by the formulations and assumptions of the researcher' (Potter, 1997: 150, in press). Even when interviews are 'naturalized', or treated as natural, says Potter (1996), the 'dominant question–answer format' 'is not ideal for getting at the sorts of turn-by-turn display[s] of action and understandings that conversation analysts have utilized so effectively' (p. 135). Potter and Wetherell (1995) thereby conclude that the 'most suitable *materials*' for getting

at participants' 'everyday' understandings are 'records of natural interaction' (p. 221, my emphasis).

Thus, both discourse and conversation analysts treat certain *types* of data (which *have not* been 'got up' by the researcher) as natural, and other types of data (which *have* been 'got up' by the researcher) as non-natural. In both, natural data are preferred.

Discussion: a sustainable distinction?

I would suggest that the natural and contrived distinction is inherently problematic, and can only be sustained by relying on assumptions about data and the role of the researcher that discourse and conversation analysts elsewhere seem keen to refute.

For example, by labelling certain data-types as naturalistic and others as non-naturalistic, one reifies the method, implying that specific data collection techniques will determine what is said in a particular context, and the type of data one will obtain. Similarly, by making the researcher and/or research intervention central to this distinction, one reifies the role of the researchers, treating them as somehow ontologically distinct from the other members present, whose contributions to the interaction are of a different status by virtue of their mere presence.

Conversation analysts' own approach to the endogenous production of context means this argument cannot be sustained. For the conversation analyst, context is not determined in advance of the interaction, but is both the 'project' and the 'product' of participants' practices (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991: 94; Drew and Heritage, 1992: 19; see also Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). Thus, however hard one might try to make them so, methods are not rigid, decontextualized recipes that can be applied uniformly across contexts, nor do they (or the researcher) lead to determinant (interactional) outcomes.

As conversation analysts themselves might argue, the status of an interaction as 'natural' or 'contrived' is something that (like 'institutional' or 'mundane' interaction) may only be discernible by viewing participants' orientations to it as such (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 3–4; Drew and Sorjonen, 1997: 92). Participants' own orientations help to define what an interaction can be said to be at any particular moment. It might, therefore, be fruitful to consider just what counts as an orientation to research. Thus, it would be interesting to explore how participants attend to the fact of their being involved in a social science investigation, looking at moments where they treat the setting as somehow non-natural, or attend to the occasion as a contrived one (where they orient to the presence of a tape-recorder, for example), and consider what such orientations tell us about the impact of the research context, and the researcher, on their interactions (see Speer, 2002; and Speer and Hutchby, in press, for examples of such analyses).[8]

So, on the one hand, CA researchers talk about natural and non-natural types of data (implying that such materials will in some sense determine the

nature of the data obtained), and on the other hand, they have adopted an approach to context (as endogenously produced) which works explicitly against such notions.

Several researchers warn against drawing hard and fast boundaries in social interaction research, and assuming that certain 'types' of talk are more legitimately studiable than others (see Tracy, 1994). Schegloff (1988/9), for example, argues that 'labelling and announcing an occasion of talk-in-interaction as an interview does not *ipso facto* make it one, nor does it guarantee that what began as one will remain one' (p. 215, emphasis in original). Part of the problem with the natural/contrived distinction, however, is that the method is treated as a *resource* to get at something else (the data) that is distinct from it. The data are then treated as an effect of the way they were collected, rather than as constitutive of the method or data collection technique. This cause–effect model seems peculiar in the context of a research field that spends much of its time criticizing such frameworks as both deterministic and simplistic.

Thus, the relationship between the method (be it an 'interview', 'focus group', or whatever) and the 'type' of data collected (be they 'natural' or 'contrived') may have been exaggerated or overdrawn in discursive and CA studies. As researchers, we need to be careful not to reach premature conclusions about the effects of any particular research technology on our data – especially given that the method (e.g. our data collection practices) is just one of an infinite number of potentially relevant contexts that may be made relevant in an interaction.

'Naturalness' is not something that resides in certain types of data, and our data collection practices are not intrinsically natural or contrived. Indeed, it may be sensible to follow the practice of Miller and Glassner (1997), who are sceptical of a 'neat distinction' between the natural and the cultural in social science data ('as elsewhere') (p. 111). They advocate putting 'naturally occurring data' in scare quotes. This may prove especially important given the development of the 'interview society' in which the interview is becoming 'a "naturally occurring" occasion for articulating experience' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 126), and may remind us to be more cautious in our claims about the relationship between method, context and data.

Clearly, as Potter (in press) shows, there are *practical* considerations involved in one's choice of data, to do with one's topic and particular research focus. Thus, if one's topic is the study of how counselling talk gets done, it is entirely reasonable to argue that one needs to use materials which capture counselling interaction 'first hand', in its 'home' environment, as opposed to (i) retrospective accounts of counselling experience based on interviews with clients or practitioners, (ii) experimental set-ups where one orders respondents 'now do counselling', or (iii) excerpts of scripted dramatic dialogue where a character goes to counselling, for example.

However, while it is one thing to suggest that one favours certain materials for *practical* reasons, it is quite another to translate this preference as mapping onto

some ontological distinction between what are 'natural' data and what are not. What are natural data and what are not is not decidable on the basis of either the data type *or* the role of the researcher within it. *All* data can be natural or contrived depending on what one wants to *do* with them. If one wants to analyse interview data in order to discover how interviews work, then an interview can be treated as natural for our present purposes (it can be 'naturalized'). Likewise, if one wants to analyse interview talk where participants are asked to *comment on* gender issues in order to discover how people *do* gender as a matter of course, then such prompted 'gender commentary' may seem contrived, and thus not the best data for our present purposes (Speer, 2002).

This does not mean that we will *never* gain access to general features of counselling talk or to the doing of gender in purportedly 'contrived' materials. It depends largely on whether and if the research context, its speech exchange system, for example, is *procedurally consequential* for one's topic. Schegloff (1991: 54ff) makes this point clearly in his reference to two laboratory studies, one on self-repair (Levelt, 1983) and one on interruptions (West and Zimmerman, 1983). While the former study was conducted in an experimental setting in which limitations were placed on who could speak, in the latter experimental setting there were no such restrictions. Therefore, Schegloff argues that in the former study the experimental setting *was* consequential for the topic of self-repair, while in the latter it was not.

Likewise, in his analysis of video-taped materials Drew (1989) questions whether the 'intrusion' of a video-camera may have effected his respondents in such a way as to 'contaminate their behaviour' and invalidate his findings (pp. 99–100). What he argues is that, while the camera's presence may indeed alter participants' behaviour – they may laugh and joke more, for example, this is only consequential if one is analysing, say, frequency of laughter. If this is the case, then the results of such an investigation would clearly need to take into account 'the possible disturbance effect of a camera's presence' (p. 99). If, however, says Drew, the analytic focus is on how jokes get done, their management and organization, then the disturbance of the camera and participants' knowledge that they are being filmed is not procedurally consequential for the analysis, and is thereby of little consequence. The notion of procedural consequentiality, then, represents one way in which we might begin to re-frame the natural/contrived distinction in more sophisticated terms.[9]

What should be clear is that notions of what is (i) 'naturally occurring', 'natural' or 'naturalistic', and (ii) what is 'non-naturally occurring', 'researcher-provoked', 'artificial', or 'contrived' are being used in ill-defined and theoretically inconsistent ways. Indeed, to complicate matters, the natural/contrived distinction is often conflated with and mapped onto the distinction between mundane and institutional talk (Montgomery, 2001: 402) both of which are 'naturally occurring' in the sense that they have not been 'got up' by the researcher (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

Part of the problem is that it is not always clear what these terms are being

used to refer *to*. In his introductory textbook on qualitative research in which he devotes a whole chapter to the topic of 'naturally occurring talk', David Silverman (2001) uses the terms 'naturally occurring talk', 'naturally occurring data', 'naturally occurring settings' and 'naturally occurring situations' interchangeably, on the same page (p. 159). Likewise, Schegloff (1998) uses the terms 'naturally-occurring-talk-in-interaction', 'natural ecological niche', 'naturalistic materials' and 'naturalistic data' – again all on the same page (p. 247). The conflation of such different objects as talk, data, interaction and settings is surely unsustainable in the context of a field which places so much emphasis on the minutiae and context sensitivity of language.

These inconsistencies together indicate that discursive psychologists and conversation analysts have not thought about the naturally occurring slogan so much as reproduced it. It has become a catch-all term with fuzzy boundaries and little in the way of specificity. This is rather unhelpful, and can only contribute to the confusion those new to the field (and indeed those already working within it!) struggle with when attempting to make decisions about the most 'appropriate' data sources for their research questions. What is needed if we are to make well-informed choices about the data we use, and – perhaps more importantly – produce theoretically sound, analytically tractable justifications for those choices, is a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between method, context and data. This need not necessarily involve *abandoning* the concept of 'naturally-occurring data' (which some might argue is still *rhetorically* useful). Rather, we need to be clearer and more consistent about what exactly constitutes the object of our analyses. It seems likely that such clarity and consistency will come from research exploring precisely how our data collection practices (and the researcher) are procedurally consequential for the topics to which we wish to gain access.

NOTES

1. As we shall see, these terms are often conflated and used interchangeably. For purposes of clarity, in this paper I refer to the 'natural/contrived' distinction while recognizing that not all discursive and CA researchers categorize their data in these terms.
2. Compare Harold Garfinkel's (1967) 'breaching experiments', where researcher provocation was used to illuminate participants' sense-making practices.
3. Part of the concern underlying the quest for 'natural' data, then, is to build an interactionally grounded 'science of social life' (Sacks, 1995[1992], Vol. 2: 26). As Heritage and Atkinson (1984) put it: 'Naturally occurring interaction presents an immense range of circumstances – effectively amounting to a "natural laboratory" – for the pursuit of hunches and the investigation of the limits of particular formulations by systematic comparison' (p. 3).
4. So, here, interviews and focus groups are explicitly treated as 'non-natural'. Elsewhere, however, Potter analyses focus group talk as natural data (Puchta and Potter, 1999, in press). Presumably, these focus group data are treated as natural because the group was moderated by a market researcher, not a social scientist. The question remains, however, that if a social science researcher, and not a market

researcher were to have moderated the groups, would that single change alone have been enough to make the data non-natural (i.e. at what point precisely do natural data become non-natural)?

5. As I have already noted, there is a large and growing body of discursive and CA research exploring how interviews, surveys, focus groups and other such social scientific methods 'get done' in practice.

6. Interestingly, West and Zimmerman (1983) justified studying interruptions in an experimental setting on the grounds that their earlier study of natural interactions between 'familiar' or 'intimate pairs conversing casually under relaxed circumstances' (p. 103) may have yielded invalid results 'affected by unknown factors peculiar to the catch-as-catch-can sample' (p. 106).

7. At one point Silverman (2001) even asks 'if we can . . . study what people are actually doing in "naturally occurring" situations, why should we ever want to work with "researcher-provoked" data?' (p. 159)

8. In my own focus-group research, for example, participants regularly attended to the issue of their taking part in a social science investigation. They picked up microphones, 'messed about' with, and sung into them. They recruited the tape recorder as a participant, talking as though it was an overhearing audience. At other times, the tape-recorder was treated as an available source of evidence to confirm what a participant had said ("as I said earlier on the tape"). Alternatively, participants attended to the later transcription of their comments, by saying "scratch that comment", or "I don't envy you doing the overlap". Some anonymized the data for me as I went along, offering handy hints for the transcriber. Others attended to the future audience of the data, whose potential interpretations of that data were recruited for discussion (such as "she'll love that bit"). Thus, there are occasions when issues relating to method are made explicitly relevant by participants (including the researcher), and these are fully amenable to analysis.

9. Intriguingly, however, despite suggesting that aspects of the research setting will not always be consequential for one's topic, Drew (1989) makes claims about data-type in the same chapter, that would seem to fly in the face of such suggestions. Thus he argues, as we have already seen, that the data must not have been 'produced for the purpose of study', or collected 'for any pre-formulated investigative or research purposes' (p. 96). From this perspective, naturalness is indeed something that *automatically resides in* certain data types.

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