

Title:

Co-producing a social workable matter: topics and collaborating in social work encounters

Abstract:

A common task in encounters with professionals is to identify a matter warranting professional assistance. Co-producing a 'social workable' matter in social work encounters as an interactional achievement is yet to be explored. Specifying this as an institutional and interactional project creates the opportunity to analyse how topics are collaboratively used in social work encounters to achieve a joint understanding of the work for the session. Such projects offer insights into the social actions involved in identifying matters that are relevant to the service, setting, and professional encounter. Conversation analysis of real-world social work sessions offers a way to understand how social workers and clients produce, elaborate and pursue topics as a collaborative achievement. This detailed analytic approach illuminates how social workable matters are co-produced in interaction and creates an opportunity to examine and improve collaboration in interpersonal practice contexts.

Keywords

Social work, collaboration, topicality, conversation analysis, membership categorisation analysis, mental health

Introduction

Collaboration has become established as a core feature of ethical social work practice over the past three decades, exemplifying the shift in professional ideals away from paternalistic, competitive, and medicalising discourses and towards empowering and cooperative approaches (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020; Bennett et al., 2013; Bennett & Green, 2019; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2013; White & Epston, 1990). Graham and Barter (1999) note that the early discussion of collaboration focused primarily on inter- and intra-professional collaboration as a practice skill. Drawing inspiration from liberation movements (Freire, 1972) and person-centred practice, this shift ushered in an expansive stance, incorporating structural and interpersonal collaboration with people, communities, individuals, groups, and families.

Understanding how collaboration happens is vital to articulating effective and ethical practice and to social work skills education. While it has been well established theoretically, social work research is yet to articulate how it happens in real-world practice through observing and analysing authentic social work encounters. The key to find out how collaboration happens is to analyse how it occurs in real settings. Conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) are methods for studying naturally-occurring social interactions: how people use 'turns' and social categories in

their talk and the social actions people achieve in conversation (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015; Stivers, 2013). They offer a distinctive empirical and detailed approach to investigating collaboration in practice “in the world as it happens” (Boden, 1990). This article uses CA and MCA to analyse how participants in social work encounters collaborate to produce a ‘social workable’ matter, to co-produce it in and through the skillful process of talk-in-interaction.

Collaboration as a core concern for ethical social work practice

“... to work with Aboriginal peoples, we need to develop cultural courage. This involves acknowledging our shared humanity and as such, an understanding that commitment to working collaboratively and safely with humility is pivotal.” (Bennett & Gates 2019 p. 612)

“How social workers encounter their fellow human beings is critical ... the process of coming to know is a mutual and collaborative one” (Saleebey 1996, p. 303)

Collaboration has emerged a defining feature of current social work practice, notably through the developments of strengths-based and empowerment approaches to social work practice (Lee, 2001; Rapp & Goscha, 2011; Saleebey, 2013). These approaches emphasise relationship building and joint decision making, including at the micro level of practice with individuals and families as well as meso and macro level advocacy for equity and social justice. Collaboration is equally a proper and integral component of evidence-based practice (Drisko, 2017). Collaboration has become established as a core value and principle in social work practice. It speaks to the way that social workers should engage for ethical practice in meeting the professional commitment to social justice and human rights and has been integrated into social work professional codes of ethics and practice standards (e.g. Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019; Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020, 4.2). As such, collaborative processes are integral to ethical social work practice.

Collaborative working is critically important for working with First Nations¹ people and communities. As a professional value, it is a vital dimension to decolonising social work practice itself alongside countering the continuing effects of colonisation in the wider society (Bennett et al., 2013; Bennett & Gates, 2019; Bennett & Green, 2019). Collaboration is essential to the cultural courage necessary for non-Aboriginal social workers to work with First Nations people and communities for work towards achieving social justice and promoting their self-determination, autonomy, and agency. At a conceptual level, collaboration demands ‘doing with’ and being led by people and communities marginalised by oppressive structures and systems. A genuinely collaborative stance is vital for social

¹ First Nations is the current terminology used by many Indigenous communities globally, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Indigenous nations across South and North American continents.

work to step away from paternalistic and authoritarian practices, where ‘doing for’ or ‘doing to’ were the norm. As a consequence, it is essential to understand how collaboration works in practice.

Social work encounters are the setting where mutuality and collaboration are enacted in practice through the process of building working relationships with people (Saleebey, 1996). While structural and macro level aspects of collaboration may be uppermost in mind for many social workers, collaboration is equally vital to micro level interpersonal practice. It is technically possible to interpret any conversation between two or more parties as a collaborative achievement, including arguments, authoritarian and directive encounters (Howe, 1991; Sharrock & Turner, 1978) Applying this characterisation to social work encounters would obscure or trivialise the skills involved in achieving collaboration as an expression of professional values for socially just practice. An ethical social work approach demands a method of interacting consistent with the professional ideals of people as experts in their lives, who are capable and have strengths, and are not defined solely by problems they experience. As an interpersonal practice, collaboration can be framed as a dynamic, two-way endeavour that unfolds moment-by-moment in communication (Sutherland & Strong, 2011). To understand how the professional value of collaboration is expressed in interpersonal practice, we need to find out how it happens in real-world practice settings where the stakes are real for those involved.

A ‘Social Workable’ Matter

A key task in professional encounters is to establish the purpose or focus for the interaction, whether it is a call to a help line, a visit to the doctor, or contact with a social worker. The social actions used to present a topic or concern as ‘doctorable’, ‘policeable’, or ‘mediatable’ issue illuminate the collaborative ‘work’ people do in these interactions to establish the legitimacy of their reason for the call or visit (e.g. Heritage & Robinson, 2006; Meehan, 1989; Robinson, 2013; Stokoe, 2013a; Zimmerman, 1992). Establishing the focus or agenda for the ‘work’ of a session is a common project in any contact with a social worker, whether it is a first encounter or an ongoing working relationship. Working out or agreeing on the focus for the encounter or session (or part thereof) is vital to purposeful work through the encounter. In this respect, the task of moving from a first topic of conversation to arrive at the matter which can be ‘social worked’ offers a useful focus to analyse how collaborative practice happens in real settings between clients and social workers.

Social work as a profession grounded in the social and interpersonal provides a strong rationale for applying CA and MCA methods to researching social work practice. Previous CA and MCA studies of social work practice have contributed to articulating practice and how skills are deployed in real-world practice situations (e.g. Flinkfeldt, 2017; Iversen, 2019; Monteiro, 2021; Suoninen & Jokinen,

2005). Applying CA and MCA to social work practice presents an opportunity to enhance reflective and reflexive practice by understanding the means through which practical activities are achieved in actual professional encounters (Ford et al., 2019; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2000; Stokoe, 2014; Suoninen & Jokinen, 2005). This approach is made possible through recording technology, enabling repeated listening and viewing to create detailed transcription and analysis of social interactions (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017). These methods attend to unfolding sequences of turns at talking, how turns are designed and received, and how participants use social categories and collections of categories to create shared understanding. CA and MCA can reveal the skills practitioners and clients use to accomplish professional tasks and achieve desired outcomes through review and analysis of actual practice (e.g. Danby et al., 2005; Heritage & Robinson, 2011; Hutchby, 2005).

No matter where during a session a social workable matter gets co-produced, a topic for conversation needs to be produced first. Topics or ‘mentionables’ (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) offer a starting point to examine how social workers and clients work together to develop a topic into a matter that is social workable. Button & Casey (1984) describe generating a topic in conversation as interactionally mutual and collaborative. In the institutional context of a social work encounter, invitations to talk are commonly a professional-side task and nominating a topic in response a client-side task. Training exemplars of topic inviting include questions like ‘what’s brought you here today?’ ‘I’m wondering what’s brought you here today’ or ‘how can I help?’ (e.g. Geldard et al., 2016 p 34). It frames the function of ‘getting down to business’ in terms of proposing that there is a candidate matter for which the client is seeking help and work to account for the visit (Danby et al., 2005; Heritage & Robinson, 2006). Such questions are recognisable as doing this topic inviting, where the professional task involves establishing the reason for seeking help as a prelude to establishing matters that may be social workable. They orient to the institutional expectation that there is a reason for seeking the professional encounter, and that the topic presented in response may include a candidate matter that might be salient to social work. The intersections between topic organisation and categorisation work offer potential insights into the interactional achievements of social workers and clients to co-produce a social workable matter.

Data

The data excerpts analysed in this paper are drawn from a study of mental health social work encounters. Participants comprise an experienced social worker working as an independent sole practitioner and two existing clients. The participants had established working relationships of over 12 months duration prior to the recorded encounters and commonly met in a pattern of weekly, fortnightly, or monthly intervals, adjusted according to the level of support needed by the client. The

social worker is a self-employed practitioner in private practice² in an Australian capital city and an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW 2020). The recordings comprise therapeutically-focused, one-on-one sessions and were conducted at the social worker's rooms.

Human research ethics approval for the project has been granted by Western Sydney University Research Ethics Committee and University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee. The encounters were digitally video recorded with the consent of all parties. Recordings were transcribed orthographically and instances of talk where generating topic and candidate social workable matters appeared were subsequently transcribed using Jeffersonian notation (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017). The excerpts have been presented at data discussion sessions to support identifying and analysing the phenomenon of co-producing a social workable matter.

There are two sessions represented in the excerpts, SWEEET001 and SWEEET002. Participants have been identified with the abbreviations SW for social worker, and CL1 and CL2 for the respective client participants. Pseudonyms have been used for personal names mentioned in the talk. Other potentially identifying detail has been redacted where pseudonyms were not feasible.

Analysis

Social work encounters fit within a grouping of less formal types of institutional interaction, having substantial structural and stylistic variation within a broadly quasi-conversational format (Peräkylä & Silverman, 1991). This analysis explores how topics unfold through turn sequences and categorisation to co-produce social workable matters. Instances of co-producing a social workable matter may appear at any point during the encounter, and in sessions of extended duration there may be more than one social workable matter addressed. The excerpts analysed here include two illustrations of session opening sequences (Excerpts 1 & 2) and two in the middle of the respective sessions (Excerpts 3 & 4). The analysis uses longer excerpts to illuminate the trajectory and unfolding of these moments in the sessions where social worker and client collaborate on the project of establishing a social workable matter.

² Private practice social work in Australia is comparable to other self-employed mental health professionals, including psychotherapists, psychologists, and other allied health. Practitioners may be self-employed and run their practice as a sole trader small business or may work as part of a small group. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers in Australia are eligible to register for a Medicare provider number for clients to receive subsidised care through the public health system under primary mental health care funding initiatives.

Accounting for the visit

Opening sequences are a common location to expect a first topic and, as discussed above, reason-for-encounter is expectable as a 'getting down to business' first point to explore in the talk. This is a task common to ongoing working relationships as well as first or acute encounters (Robinson, 2013). The following extract is an opening sequence where the social worker and client jointly establish the reason for this visit.

Excerpt 1 SWEET002

[0:00:25]

- 1 SW: °So:o how're you going?°
- 2 CL2: Yeah really good.
- 3 SW: So (3.0) the weekend before your last appointment was due,
- 4 which [was]
- 5 CL2: [Mmm]
- 6 SW: Monday, °was it Monday?°
- 7 CL2: Yep.
- 8 SW: Yeah. UM I got a message I think °was it from you or was it
- 9 from your mum° sa[ying]
- 10 CL2: [It wo]uld have been from my mum I would
- 11 [text you]
- 12 SW: [Ye:eah] That you were really not feeling very good.
- 13 Things weren't going well?
- 14 CL2: I mean the weekend was really good. The weekend went
- 15 amazing.
- 16 SW: Yeah.
- 17 CL2: And then it might have been after school because I
- 18 started=yeah I was really good I w's hyped from the weekend
- 19 SW: .HH oh [well
- 20 CL2: [and then
- 21 SW: maybe it was during the week. Maybe it
- 22 [was after (.) after our
- 23 CL2: [Yeah it probably was during the week.
- 24 SW: Appointment it might be [(unclear) Sorry.
- 25 CL2: [Because like
- 26 SW: [((keys jangling))]
- 27 CL2: [It was like Mon] day was pretty good.
- 28 SW: I hope um because it's more (.) than a week
- 29 CL2: Yeah.
- 30 SW: My memory's not as good about
- 31 CL2: Yeah.
- 32 SW: [the time.]
- 33 CL2: [Ah it was]

34 SW: Sorry.
 35 CL2: It was just like getting to the point where they were just
 36 constantly doing thi[ngs
 37 SW: [Mm.
 38 CL2: And excluding me, and I was just [like
 39 SW: [Mm
 40 CL2: Well fantas|tic

SW's extended "So:o" signals a move into the business of the interaction (Bolden, 2008). The 'general enquiry' question which follows fits with the broader context of an ongoing working relationship. This is a contrast with acute or first encounters, where opening invitations to talk from the professional side are more commonly designed to elicit a new or acute problem (Robinson, 2013). Here, the question is designed as seeking an update or 'picking up where we left off.' CL2 responds with a news announcement "yeah really good" in line 2.

While being 'really good' may be a candidate social workable matter, available to be topicalised in the context of positive change and strengths perspective, in this instance SW's next turn in line 3 orients to an interactional trouble, suggesting this was not the news announcement SW was anticipating. The SW deploys the topic transition marker 'so' followed by a three second pause, a significant silence consistent with a pre-delicate matter perturbation (Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990). This signals that SW is preparing to introduce a matter that is interactionally and topically sensitive, as it disputes CL's self-account as well as a negative emotional state. The extended silence followed by a series of turns beginning with time references (lines 3-6) and proffering a further news announcement from SW regarding a message (line 8). SW continues the perturbation through an interpolated question regarding the potential source of the message, which delays her production of the point of concern. CL2 pursues this delay through a comment on the source being identifiable through the medium it was received. This series of turns appears to 'pass the baton' back and forth over whose task it is to account for the potentially delicate matter occasioning this visit.

Eventually in lines 12-13, SW produces the delicate matter, that a message from CL2's mother expressed concern that CL2 was "really not feeling very good." This concern disputes CL2's initial 'really good' personal state report, however CL2 treats it as an opening to topicalise personal life events and mood responses – "might've been after school" (line 17), "hyped from the weekend" (line 18), "getting to the point where they were just constantly doing things and excluding me" (lines 35-38). Although this update involves a different candidate social workable matter from CL2's initial self-report, these divergent news items can be seen as topically embedded in the initial personal state query and are treated by SW and CL in the following turns as accounting for the visit.

The interactional work involved here displays sensitivity to the CL2's business (here, their account for their personal state) as *their* business (Button & Casey, 1985; Pomerantz, 1980). This links also to a social work professional stance of recognising the person as expert in their lives. Presenting the expressed concern in this fashion upholds CL2's expertise in his life while also addressing the professional task to check a concern for CL2's mental health. Even with the institutional setting and a third-party expression of concern providing a warrant to dispute CL2's self-report, SW engages in a collaborative multi-turn production of the concern and opens the floor to CL2 to account for it. "Yeah really good" and the third-party expression of concern become intertwined accountable matters that set the warrant for this encounter. Both parties deploy a sequence of turns that unfolds into the topic pivot at lines 12-13, orienting to while simultaneously delaying production of the concern which has prompted this visit while also maintaining CL2's authority to account for his experience. It equally presents 'expressing concern' as an action that people in the category 'mothers' do. SW invites CL to coproduce this pivot in the inserted side query regarding the source of the message ('was it from you or your Mum'). These preparatory turns link forward to the topic pivot question that appears as an itemised news enquiry (Button & Casey, 1985) - "things weren't going so well?" - at line 13, which functions as eliciting a due report on the matter of the expressed concern. CL2 then launches into an extended storytelling related to the social exclusion by erstwhile friends at school.

The collaborative accounting for the visit through topic nomination and response in this excerpt achieves a number of actions. It offers a means for the social worker to avoid a direct dispute or correction of the client's personal state report, allowing scope for the client to preserve face and authorship over their lived experience. The social worker deploys a multi-turn utterance to introduce a third-party warrant for the encounter that poses a potential challenge to the client's self-described positive state. SW shades the topic from temporal context (the weekend before your last appointment was due) to initiating event (I got a message) to uncertain source of message presented designed as a question (was it from your or was it from your mum) before arriving at the delicate matter of challenging the client's self-described state, warranted by an expression of concern that the client was instead not feeling very good (Potter & Hepburn, 2003). What appears in the social worker's next utterance is a reformulated topic inviting question, this time with a more precise design to seek a specific update on events or experiences which gave rise to the expression of concern. Subsequent turns demonstrate ways that CL2 picks up elements of the proffered topic shifts to situate both feeling good and being not so good as linked topics. These linked topics create the opening to co-produce the social workable matter of emotional responses to social exclusion and navigating friendships.

Getting to the heart of the social workable matter

Getting down to business in ongoing working relationships has distinctive interactional characteristics. Clark & Rendle-Short (2016) identified how time references appear as a method of accomplishing an ongoing relationship, performing tasks of sustaining coherence within and across sessions. Time references may be deployed to situate updates of events between sessions, as evident in Excerpt 1 above. They can also serve the purpose of ‘picking up where we left off’ that establishes interactional continuity and coherence, ‘re-finding’ each other (Clark & Rendle-Short 2016). This can appear in preliminary talk, as seen in the following Extract 2, lines 1-4. This preliminary talk in lines 1-4 gets bounded by SW’s general enquiry “so um what’s been going on?” (line 5). This topic inviting question treats the prior talk as not having produced a first topic and so in order to progress the business of the session, a first topic is due (Button and Casey, 1984). The question invites an update, opening the floor to the client to produce a first topic. Important to the context of social work practice, the design of the question does not presume that a problem or difficulty must be the type of topic produced. This maintains a neutral stance for a client to nominate any kind of possible topic, including a ‘good news’ strengths-focused one.

Generating a topic is a necessary first step in co-producing a social workable matter. However, the topic may need work to render salient to the setting of ‘social work’ and elaborated into a matter that can be ‘workable’. A general enquiry may not always elicit an obviously social workable matter such as an issue, concern, or change report. Such situations require all parties to collaborate on the interactional project of getting to the heart of the social workable matter at hand. Here, CL1 volunteers a first topic of applying for a job as a starting point to coproduce a social workable matter, as becomes evident in the unfolding sequence of turns.

Excerpt 2 SWEEET001

[0:01:11]

- 1 SW: Okay. So, I haven't seen you now for since 26 September↑
- 2 CL1: Something like that.
- 3 SW: So that's almost a month since referring to my ((unclear)).
- 4 CL1: Yeah.
- 5 SW: So: o um .ptch (.) what's been going on?
- 6 CL1: Nothing much, really. I've made a resume
- 7 SW: =Ri↓ght↑
- 8 CL1: That I'm going to be sending=

- 9 SW: =Yeah?
- 10 CL1: To um (.) ((cinema chain, suburb))
- 11 SW: Ri↓ght↑
- 12 CL1: And (2.0) I'm also writing a script because then I can make
13 a video and send to them,
- 14 SW: Ri↓ght↑
- 15 CL1: Just building up the nerve °hh°
- 16 (1.0)
- 17 CL1: [Um,]
- 18 SW: [And] is the job still open?
- 19 CL1: Yes.
- 20 SW: Ah that's [great]
- 21 CL1: [They're] still advertising for it.
- 22 SW: Oh great, okay that's good.
- 23 (1.0)
- 24 SW: Good. Good, good. Okay.
- 25 CL1: They seem to be rather picky tho(h)ugh heh
- 26 SW: Yeah, I think they're very picky. Yeah.
- 27 CL1: Yeah.
- 28 SW: So don't take it personally if they don't choose you.
- 29 CL1: No, I know=
- 30 SW: =And it's=
- 31 CL1: =I mean, if they want someone who ha- it's good for people
32 of an optimistic attitude, and I'm depressed person with
33 social anxi↓ety, ↓so u(h)m (h) heh .hhh (0.5) can't say I
34 fit the bill HHheh
- 35 SW: Yeah, but you know (0.5) .tch in jobs, sometimes we're
36 different to how we are (0.5) >in other parts of our lives
37 like we're< we're different kind of per[sonas]
- 38 CL1: [Yeah]

39 SW: depending on where we are?
 40 (7.5)
 41 CL1: I know. It's just exhausting

While CL1 initially starts with a no-news report “nothing much, really,” she follows on with a newsworthy-event-report (made a resume) that progresses generating a topic (Button & Casey 1984), in this case, applying for a job. The initial no-news report downgrades the topic’s newsworthiness, however it equally orients to the expectation that a report of some kind is now due. CL1 develops the topic of applying for a job over a multi-turn utterance, updating SW on what she has done for the application (lines 6, 8, 10, 12). SW uses minimal continuer responses during this update sequence, providing for CL1 to retain the floor and authority over topic development and the matter for social working. CL then elaborates the topic through a link with nerves and confidence “just building up the nerve” (line 15), introducing emotional response to this life event as a candidate social workable matter. SW pursues the topic with a follow-up question in line 18, orienting to this topic’s potential. While the job still being open is topically relevant, this information request temporarily stalls the process.

The unfolding sequence from line 25 gets to the heart of the social workable matter. CL1’s nerves make sense in the context of a picky employer, where chances of success may be low. CL1’s ‘they’ (25) indexes the employer (the cinema where CL1 intends to send her resume and video). Here SW uses the upgrade “very picky” to formulate the social workable matter of addressing and modulating possible emotional responses to potential lack of success, which links back to CL1’s emotion report “building up the nerve” (line 15). Some uses of word repeats in professional settings work to encourage the person to say more (Jenkins et al., 2021). Here, the repeat plus upgrade from “rather picky” to “very picky” sets up for SW to present the formulation “so don’t take it personally if they don’t choose you” (line 28). This formulation collaborates in producing a joint understanding of the social workable as worry and potential distress in response to rejection. It represents an instance of the practice skill of normalising (Geldard et al., 2016), enacted through SW’s uptake of the social category picky employer. ‘Anyone’ in the category of an applicant in this situation could have this experience and the action of rejecting applications is an expectable feature of the category picky employer. Anyone can feel nerves about applying for a job and chances of success in a highly competitive context. Additionally, anyone might not be successful because the employer is picky.

While CL1 acknowledges this formulation with “no I know,” she shifts the topic to dispute that the category ‘anyone’ is the most relevant for her at this point. CL1 shapes the topic of ‘chances of job

application success' having personal relevance through a criterion from the employer about how they pick - an optimistic attitude. She positions herself as a polar opposite to a projected ideal candidate who has an optimistic attitude, using categorisations of mental health. She re-casts the social workability of this matter as distinctively personal and connects potential rejection of her application to being a "depressed person with social anxiety" (lines 32-33). SW's responses (lines 26, 28) orient to the social workability of the situation - that it is possible to take rejection of a job application personally even where there's valid reasons to interpret it as impersonal rather than personal failing. CL1's topic shift makes sense of a possible rejection through self-categorisation, deploying social categories of mental illness to contrast herself with a projected 'ideal candidate' implied by the job description.

CL1 has already categorised herself as being a person who need to "build up the nerve" to apply for a job she really wants. She goes on to deploy an artful contrast between the ideal candidate "people of an optimistic attitude" and herself as a "depressed person with social anxiety" who doesn't "fit the bill" (lines 31-34). SW collaborates with the topic elaboration, however does so through disputing and reformulating CL1's treatment of the feature 'optimistic' as fundamentally incompatible with a 'depressed person with social anxiety'. SW's pursuit of managing mood as a social workable matter continues the initial move in line 28. SW presents this challenge in the form of an alternate formulation and perspective - that people enact different personas in different situations, including at work. The challenge gets softened through use of hedging "yeah, but you know (0.5) .tch" suggesting how CL1 could still 'fit the bill'. CL1 again acknowledges this counter-formulation. In response, she refocuses the social workable matter; that for people in the category depressed with social anxiety, doing this may be possible but "it's just exhausting" (line 41). This creates an opening for CL1 to get to the heart of the matter - that in the context of her mental health doing these things is an extra burden that others ('anyone') do not have.

The unfolding talk in this excerpt offers an illustration of collaborative production of a social workable matter involving sequential categorisation work, where 'who-one-is' for a particular situation is part of the interactional work (Fitzgerald & Rintel, 2013). CL1 initiates the topic but does not get to the heart of the social workable matter on her own. SW's questions and responses actively work towards co-producing the social workable matter of experiencing normative life experiences as exhausting as a consequence of mental health concerns from the topic applying for a job. In this respect, the collaborative work here works as a funnel that refines the initial topic into something social workable. SW is collaborating to get from that topic nomination to the social workable. Neither is SW 'telling' CL1 what the matter is. Even in the instructing-type statement

‘don’t take it personally’ is not a SW-side foreclosure of what the social workable matter is. It offers an ‘anyone could feel this way’ normalising reframe, with a clear categorial link to the ‘picky employer’. SW’s counter proposal does not dismiss CL1’s concern as the social workable. Rather, it with the ongoing relationship ‘picking up where we left off’, having grounds to present a personal challenge this soon in the encounter and have it accepted, even though the premise is ultimately refuted by CL1. Equally, SW persists with counter-proposed ‘anyone’ categorisation in the ‘many people are different in different settings’ to proffer a challenge to CL’s proposed automatic self-exclusion. The heart of the social workable matter unfolds in this tension between SW suggesting opportunity, not being limited by mental health categories, and CL1 counter-proposing why and how they do matter.

Making social workable connections using topics from prior sessions

In an ongoing working relationship, prior sessions are a ‘store’ of social workable matters, topics, and concerns. Topics may become recurrently social workable over multiple sessions as connections between situations and experiences unfold. Together they constitute a shared knowledge territory, where all parties have independent epistemic access and the topics which have been previously co-produced as social workable matters. Where we are unable to observe and analyse how co-participants built those shared meanings through those prior sessions, how this shared knowledge territory developed is inaccessible (Deppermann & Schmidt, 2021). However, the parties in a session may make explicit reference to topics from prior sessions that offer insights into that history and how it can be used in the present encounter.

The two excerpts discussed in this section illustrate an interactional practice to make topics from prior sessions overtly available in the present encounter, which appears in the form of ‘we’ve talked before about.’ This practice renders matters from previous encounters available in the present encounter as a topic resource. The instances in the excerpts below occur part way through the encounter, around one-third to half-way through the respective sessions. Topics from prior encounters are proposed as relevant to the present social workable matter to generate a more sophisticated shared understanding. While the practice could be used by any party, in these excerpts it appears as a social worker side practice to link topics across sessions, thereby making social workable connections between matters.

In the lead up to the excerpt below, CL2 has engaged in an extended storytelling about the weekend that ‘went amazing’ (mentioned in Excerpt 1), recounting experiences of a sleepover with friends and a budding romantic relationship. SW orients to the session focus on friendships and romantic

relationships which has unfolded and deploys the topic 'boundaries' to propose a forward-looking link to a social workable matter of managing relationships, adolescence, and emotional health.

Excerpt 3 SWEET002 "remember boundaries?"

[0:35:36]

- 1 CL2: I'm °I'm° working towards getting into a really good
 2 place °and like° I feel I'm getting close to that and
 3 (.) I don't want to set myself back because
 4 subconsciously I do give (0.5) people:e (.) too much
 5 of my energy too much of my time too much of my
- 6 SW: And therefore=
- 7 CL2: And that's=
- 8 SW: =let's talk about boundaries[:s:s]
- 9 CL2: [That's] what I'm=
- 10 SW: =Remember boundaries? We've talked about boundaries
 11 before=
- 12 CL2: =Yeah.
- 13 SW: Alright. So boundaries are really good because
 14 they're like your ↑own ↓rules.
- 15 CL2: Yeah.
- 16 SW: Not rules about where to walk or what to do or what
 17 not to do but more boundaries about (.) okay what is
 18 it I ↓need that makes me [feel] safe,
- 19 CL2: [Yeah]
- 20 SW: And makes me feel like (2.0) if you treat me this
 21 particular way I feel respected. (1.0) If you walk
 22 all over that idea that I'm saying I need, then I
 23 don't feel safe. So what are some boundaries you want
 24 in this relationship that you didn't put in place in
 25 the previous one,
- 26 CL2: Um I feel like (1.0) I need to be able to step back.

CL2 has just concluded accounting for differences between his experience of this new relationship compared with a recently ended relationship. In lines 1-5 he shifts to assessing his current state and what might set him back. CL1 topicalises the problem of giving too much in relationships (lines 4-5)

which he links with the risk of setbacks. CL1's topic linking makes it possible for SW to propose the topic pivot in line 6 "And therefore let's talk about boundaries." SW uses the directive "let's" (line 8) to propose a shift of topical focus. However, the design uses a collective form - let us - creating an invitation to shared, collaborative activity. The ancillary turn "remember boundaries? we've talked about boundaries before" (line 10) announces SW's pursuit of this topic by making a social workable connection between the immediately preceding topic (excitement over a new romance) and the topic boundaries in interpersonal relationships from prior sessions. SW deploys a series of discourse markers to nominate and then pursue the topic of boundaries, starting with "and therefore" (line 6), "remember boundaries?" (line 10), and the turn initial "so" (line 13), emphasising the workability of this topic at this point in the session. CL2's "yeah" minimal agreements align with this proposed shared orientation even while SW is holding the floor, with the interactional task of being instructed, and agreeing with the topic relevance. Even though SW deploys an information delivery format in lines 13-23 (Peräkylä & Silverman, 1991), it is important to recognise how CL2 has co-produced the shift by topicalising the link between what he has experienced in past relationships and its effect on his mental health. CL2 re-joins the substantive co-production of the matter at hand, taking boundaries from the generalised information in SW's preceding terms into the personally applicable action of instituting boundaries, "I need to be able to step back" (line 26). CL2's joining response demonstrates how the proposed refinement of the social workable to boundaries is relevant at this point, developing some intervention strategies to sustain the positive change.

This next excerpt occurs in CL1's session, during an extended discussion on wanting social connection in context of social anxiety. Prior to this, the topic focus had shifted between difficulties connecting with friends to CL1's experiences with parental rules which may contribute to her social anxiety, and then returned to socialising with friends with a candidate formulation of fear over doing things 'wrong'. SW uses 'and so we've talked before about' to propose a topic pivot for shared consideration in pursuit of formulating connections between situations where CL1 experiences anxiety and how anxiety interferes with doing things she wants to do..

Extract 4 SWEEET001 'we've talked before about ...'

[0:25:54]

- | | | |
|---|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | SW: | °Yeah. Yeah° and so we've talked before about how |
| 2 | | <u>sometimes</u> it's quite challenging for you:u (.) >to |
| 3 | | sort of extend yourself socially because you've got |
| 4 | | social <u>anxiety</u> < so it's going to be fear- <u>producing</u> |
| 5 | | (.) to do social things °isn't it° |

6 CL1: ((nods head))

7 SW: °Right° (.) so then I guess (0.5) >a question I have
 8 is< (1.0) ho:ow have you in the pa:ast overcome that
 9 fear in order to have some nice social
 10 interactions=because you ↑ha↓ve (.) you've been out
 11 with some friends before you've been out with
 12 Prudence a few times (.) so you've overcome that fear
 13 and you feel safe with that person and you've enjoyed
 14 those interactions, °yeah?°

15 CL1: Yes.

16 SW: Yeah. So, what is it that stops you doing more of
 17 that,
 18 (3.5)

19 CL1: ((leg jiggle)) ((shrug)) M↑m↓m↑ I don't know, I
 20 dislike the sensation of anxiety?

21 SW: °Mm° So even though you've done it and overcome the
 22 anxiety, the idea of having to do it, and overcome
 23 the anxiety is in itself frightening.

24 CL1: No. It's ((leans forward, takes tissue, wipes nose))
 25 draining.

26 SW: Draining. Okay. So it uses a lot of energy?

27 CL1: Yes.

The work in progress is focused on developing a more nuanced shared understanding of the social workable matter as a foundation for creating change. SW uses 'we've talked before about' to propose a connection between "extend yourself socially" (line 3) from previous sessions and the present matter at hand. CL1's minimal continuer nods (line 6) offer some agreeing with SW's formulation of what they have discussed before and aligning with the pivot in topic as relevant at this point. SW inserts a characterisation of CL1 as someone who overcomes and succeeds in enjoying social activities in the face of anxiety generated fear (lines 7-14). This categorisation work sets up for SW's topic pursuit question about barriers (lines 16-17). CL1's silence at line 18 followed by using a tissue (line 24) are in-the-moment signs of upset associated with the topic focus (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017), which she describes as a sensation (line 19). SW's response orients to the expressed upset with a gentler tone and proffering an emotion-related interpretation "frightening" (line 23). SW frames fear as the critical aspect of social anxiety impacting CL1, an emotion-feeling category to formulate a query about the source of her struggle (line 22-23). However CL1 responds with a correction from the emotion focus to a physical-feeling category as the most relevant experiential

feature. The work in progress here is a collaborative activity to develop a more nuanced shared understanding of the social workable matter. CL actively corrects SW's application of available category features for 'social anxiety', then affirms SW's candidate paraphrase "draining ... uses a lot of energy" as getting it right (lines 25-26).

In these two excerpts, SW deploys 'we've talked before about' to make social workable connections between potentially relevant topics from previous sessions and the present matter at hand. This practice of linking a present matter at hand with matters topicalised in previous encounters creates both interactional and therapeutic space to link temporally and contextually disparate topics. As a SW side action, the first person plural 'we' invites a shared approach to looking for strengths and exceptions in past actions that could be applied to overcoming anxiety in the future (Excerpt 4) and developing intervention strategies to sustain positive change that the client (Excerpt 3). As a method for making topics from prior encounters available, it functions as a conjunctive pivot to make social workable connections between topics, events, and sessions.

Discussion – collaboration 'writ miniature'

Interpersonal practice is where most people experience social work, so how we do collaborating in interpersonal micro level practice matters. The project of co-producing a social workable matter is an instance where interpersonal collaboration happens and establishes a point of focus for how we can build an understanding of social work collaboration 'writ miniature' as an interactional achievement. The analysis in this article presents for the first time a range of social worker-side and client-side methods for achieving a joint understanding of the focus for work in the encounter. It illuminates skills related to producing social workable matters, including inviting topics, develop, elaborating, disputing, correcting, and being corrected. Social worker and client collaborate to identify the matter relevant for being 'social worked' in the encounter arising from diverse first topics. As this analysis has explored, generating a topic is an important step. However topic generation is a beginning rather than the end of this process. Social workers and clients deploy topic development, pivots, backwards and forwards linking, and categorisation resources to co-produce social workable matters. Analysing instances where a candidate social workable matter is not immediately clear illuminates how social workers and clients use these interactional practices to achieve the co-production of a social workable matter. This article demonstrates how producing a social workable matter can be observed and analysed as mutual and collaborative, an institutional task involving social worker-side and client-side actions.

Applying CA and MCA in social work research have advantages for describing and analysing professional practice skills grounded as they happen in real-world practice. They have a parallel

benefit to highlighting the interactional role and skills of clients as co-participants in encounters. Much literature on professional practice and consultation skills rightly focuses on ‘practitioner side’ skills, and social work is not alone in this respect. However this can inadvertently render the client implicitly passive or invisible and their skills obscured due to a limited focus on one side of the interaction. In the context of professional commitments to recognising client expertise in their lives, the sustained focus on practitioner side contributions and relative absence of client-side contributions (with the occasional exception of working with non-voluntary clients) risks undermining the centring client skills, capabilities, and expertise. CA and MCA can help to bring the client back into view as a skilled and active participant in putting forward aspects of their lives as social workable. As illustrated through the analysis above, this approach similarly reveals practitioner-side skills in formulating and, importantly, standing corrected when their candidate formulations of the social-workable are not accurate for the client. Drawing out and recognising client-side skills fits with strengths-based and empowerment theories for social work practice that aim to put people’s competence and capacities at the centre of empowering practice (Saleebey, 2013).

Analysing actual practice gives us the opportunity to observe the realities of practice to identify and improve genuinely collaborative interpersonal practice. Idealised or imagined exemplars and simulations are frequently not fair representations of authentic interactions (Stokoe, 2013b; Stokoe et al., 2020). Social workers in practice are equally aware that authentic practice encounters do not mirror the neatness presented in textbook exemplars. This can have a range of negative effects, including setting up unrealistic expectations for social work practitioners and students alike. CA and MCA analytic methods present a distinctive opportunity to articulate and enhance social work through understanding how actual practice happens. This will contribute to articulating practice and to identify directions for improving practice skills to effectively and genuinely collaborate with people, which establishes a foundation for identifying and describing effective practice and for professional skills education and improvement. Understanding how collaboration works in real-world practice is consequential for increasing effective and authentically mutual collaboration in interpersonal practice as a key manifestation of social work practice and values.

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