

PITFALLS OF AGENCY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIOLOGISTS: SOME THOUGHTS FROM AN INTERACTIONAL POINT OF VIEW

Giolo FELE¹

Abstract: *The point of the paper is discussing whether the term ‘agency’ is useful for the study of interaction practices or whether instead it denotes a set of features which relate to an individualistic perspective from the point of view of a theory of social action, and a voluntaristic perspective from the point of view of a theory of language in action. The argument of the paper is that studying interaction does not require an individualistic and voluntaristic notion of social action. In this regard, Goffman, Garfinkel and conversational analysis offer an alternative approach to the study of interaction practices in natural settings. This reasoning stems from data collected during research conducted on medical emergency call centres in Italy.*

Key words: *agency, social interaction, coordination, collaboration, emergency.*

1. Introduction

The notion of agency in its more recent version put forward by various strands of contemporary sociological theory (after Parsons) assumes an autonomous and reflexive actor against the regularities and constrictions of the social structure. In face of the conformism imposed by social structures, the notion of agency seemingly enables the introduction of elements of creativity, subjectivity, and choice into everyday action. Social action is thus seen not as routine and predictable, the persistent reproduction of structure, but a factive and conscious contribution by individuals amid the unforeseen contingencies of the everyday social world. For those who analyze social interaction in

particular the term ‘agency’ seems to retain undeniable theoretical advantages (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Instead of focusing on social structures (on persistence), the notion of ‘agency’ emphasises the local, micro, constructive and individual dimension of social action. It seems to be a term suitable for summarizing the processual and dynamic components of social interaction which a solely structural account fails to grasp.

I believe instead that the notion of ‘agency’ – inasmuch as it refers to an individualistic perspective from the point of view of a theory of social action, or a voluntaristic perspective from the point of view of a theory of language in action – is not a useful tool for the study of social interaction. The notion of ‘agency’

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy.

counterposes that of 'structure'; it therefore stipulates and creates a dichotomy which has a long history in the social sciences (King 2004). The notion of agency obliges us to deal with individuals – which is not the solution if interaction processes are being studied. But nor does the solution lie in the alternative to agency, namely structure. The interesting issue seems to consist in finding a way to overcome this alleged dichotomy between agency and structure so that social interactions can be studied from the point of view of their relative autonomy.

In this regard, the work of Goffman with its notion of interaction order, and the work of Garfinkel with its notion of phenomenal field, both represent two formidable theoretical departure points for overcoming the theoretical dichotomy between agency and structure. In regard to the empirical study of social interaction, conversation analysis offers the most suitable analytical approach and the methodological tools with which to supersede the dichotomy.

2. Objectives

In this paper I would like to show how the notion of agency does not help in understanding the processes of social interaction. The basis for my argument will be data collected during research on medical emergency call & dispatch centres (telephone number 118 in Italy). My two main points of reference are the so called "workplace studies" (Heath and Luff 2000), (Heath, Knoblauch et al. 2000), from one side; and the studies by Zimmerman et al. on the social organization of emergency calls (Whalen and Zimmerman 1987), (Whalen and Zimmerman 1990), (Zimmerman 1984), (Zimmerman 1992b), (Zimmerman 1992a), (Whalen and Zimmerman 2005) and on the social organization of the

dispatch (Whalen 1995) and (Whalen 1995), from the other side.

In this paper I would like to present that which seems to be a recurrent pattern of behaviour in the interaction among operators who work together in the handling of emergency cases. I shall analyse in particular a common method used to send dispatches by the dispatcher, which consists in repeating out loud on the radio what is being communicated at the moment by the call-taker. This would seem to be a case of zero-agency where a person has minimum control over his/her behaviour and verbal production

If these cases are examined from the point of view of interaction processes, therefore shifting our attention from an individual, single actor to the relation between the parties and to the ecological context in which this relation takes place, matters become more complicated. What seems to be an example of zero-agency is in fact an efficient form of behaviour whereby the actors contribute collaboratively and collectively to the ongoing activity.

I shall conclude by arguing that only by keeping into consideration the system of interaction, and therefore only renouncing an individualist and voluntaristic perspective on social action, can one fully understand the complexity of the forms of social action.

3. Material and Methods

In order to clarify how the analysis of interaction can dispense with an 'ingenuous' notion of agency, I shall examine a specific work setting and describe one emblematic case. The material analysed consists of video recordings made at an operations centre which handles emergency calls to the 118 telephone number in a region of North-Eastern Italy. Events are handled by

two operators working side by side in a room which takes incoming telephone requests for emergency assistance. The calls are fielded by a 'call-taker'. Once the

relevant information has been acquired, a second person, the dispatcher, contacts the emergency vehicle crews in order to organize the operation.



Fig. 1. *Call taker (foreground) and dispatcher (background)*

The excerpt I will analyze concerns the phase when the emergency vehicles are dispatched.

3.1. "It's a wasp"

The following extract is taken from the official recording of the dispatch:

030902 "It's a wasp" radio dispatch
 01 Attention five three one
 02 Yes go ahead
 03 Proceed in red
 04 to Dante square here in town
 05 where the monument is
 06 for an anaphylactic reaction
 07 Seems seriously ill.
 08 look a:h
 09 It's a wasp.

The dispatcher is the only one of the two operators who speaks. He performs the dispatch according to the canonical procedure. In our case this is a dispatch of an emergency vehicle to assist a person stung by a wasp.

If the dispatch is considered in terms of the utterance production format described by Goffman (Goffman 1979), the three

figures identified by Goffman are involved in the delivery. The dispatcher is not only the sounding box or the talking machine, the person who produces the sound message, he is also the message's author; moreover, the dispatcher is also in some way responsible for the message because he is the person at the operations centre who officially contacts the vehicles on the ground.

If we take Duranti's definition of agency (Duranti 2001), the dispatcher appears to have a high degree of control over his behaviour (he knows states of the world which he communicates authoritatively to another person); his actions strongly influence other entities in the world (he issues instructions to distant subjects that not only produce cognitive change with respect to the previous knowledge state but are also outright orders to act in a particular way); his actions are subject to assessment, in the sense that they not only generally pertain to the standard procedures for performing a professional

task but are of direct importance for a specific task at a specific moment in a specific case.

However, if we consider the ecological context of the dispatch more broadly by analysing the organization of the work

which enabled delivery of the dispatch, the definition of the dispatcher's presumed agency changes radically. There follows a transcription of the video recording made of the same few moments (the dispatch is in bold).

030902 "It's a wasp" Video dispatch

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01 CT      okay?
02         bye, [see you ]
03 Disp    [shall we send ] the ambulance car?
04 CT      yes, in [ red ]
05 Disp    [attention five three one ]
06 CT      (he's going up-),yes, meanwhile the ambulance car, yes.
07 Radio   [yes go ahead]
08 CT      in [Dante Square, >right near to the mo[nument< ]
09 Disp    [proceed in red]
10         to Dante Square here in town
11         where the monument is,
12 CT      for an anaphylactic
13         [reaction::, (apparently serious) ]
14 Disp    [for an anaphylactic reaction apparently] serious
15         (.)
16         look a:h
17         It's a wasp.
18 CT      hhhhhhhhhhh ((laughing))
19         the patient is a wasp ((laughing))
20         °hhhhh hhh °hhhh h h h
21         "the eh- is seriously ill", the wasp is ill
22         °hhhh
23 Disp    listen, I send after him the:,
24         the [(-----) also]
25 CT      [send the five] four eight
01         yes:, (after)

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3.2. "No agency"?

At the beginning of the extract, we find the two 'actors' – the call-taker and the dispatcher – at the moment when the emergency call is going to be concluded and the dispatch is about to be made. The call-taker is completing the telephone call requesting the intervention (lines 1 and 2). The dispatcher addresses his colleague before she has completed both the telephone call and her turn (note the overlap between the call-takers turn at line 2 and the dispatcher's turn at line 3). The dispatcher has heard the telephone call, but he does not have access to the information that the caller has given to the call-taker

(the speakerphone is not enabled). He has heard only what the call-taker repeated aloud during the conversation.

As well known in the literature, this is a formidable source of orientation for all those present in the setting, in that a colleague's repetitions aloud and questions make publicly available – 'in the air' so to speak – salient elements of the communication which may have procedurally important consequences for the subsequent actions of other colleagues (Heath and Luff 1996) e (Goodwin and Goodwin 1996). I shall not dwell on this aspect of the operators' work (which is not given in the extract). I merely point out that the dispatcher is able to anticipate the

next relevant action (sending the ambulance car, line 3) without being given any explicit instructions. The dispatcher performs his turn in interrogative form (*shall we send the ambulance car?*): that is, his turn projects a pertinent action by his colleague which consists in confirming or disconfirming the proposal. The call-taker, who has just closed the telephone call, immediately answers her colleague (line 4), agreeing with his proposal (line 4, *yes*, means “I confirm that in this case the ambulance car should be sent”) and adding another crucial element to the dispatch delivery, namely the urgency of the event. In this case, the gravity of the incident is indicated by its being flagged as “red” (line 4: *yes, in red*). The operation code must now be communicated to the crew of the ambulance car.

What one sees in action throughout the extract are two systems of communication. The first is the face-to-face interaction between the two operators in the call centre, the communication of information relevant to the intervention between the call-taker and the dispatcher; the second is the interaction mediated by the radio communications system which connects the dispatcher in the dispatch centre with the emergency crews on the ground.

The dispatcher contacts an ambulance (number 531, line 5) even before the call-taker has completed her turn. [1] The communication between the call-taker and the dispatcher proceeds in parallel with the communication between the dispatcher and the ambulance car crew. The call-taker sequentially produces, item by item, the information needed by the dispatcher to deliver the dispatch. The dispatcher merely relays, almost automatically, the information as he receives it from the call-taker. The latter tells the dispatcher where the incident has occurred (line 8: *In Dante Square, right near to the*

monument), which is the place where the ambulance car should head. In the dispatcher’s hands (or better his voice), this information furnished by the call-taker becomes an instruction issued to the ambulance car.

The dispatcher resumes radio communication with the ambulance car even before the call-taker has completed her turn. The dispatcher begins the dispatch by stating the urgency code of the incident (line 9: *proceed in red*) as just previously defined by the call-taker (line 4) and then tells the ambulance car where it should go (lines 10-11: *to Dante Square here in town, where the monument is*) as the call-taker has described it in her immediately previous turn.

At this point, the dispatcher’s turn addressed to the ambulance car crew is suspended. The call-taker has shifted her attention from her colleague to the computer screen in front of her. She is now logging the incident data in the call centre database. At this perceived suspension, [2] although the call-taker does not interrupt her task (completing the computer form) or change her posture (she is facing the computer screen with her hands on the keyboard), she provides her colleague with the information that he requires (line 12: *For an anaphylactic reaction, apparently serious*). Before the call-taker’s turn has ended, the dispatcher resumes the communication via radio and repeats word by word the information that the call-taker has just given him (line 13: *For an anaphylactic reaction, apparently serious*). The dispatch concludes with description of the cause of the anaphylactic reaction (lines 15-16: *look a:h, it’s a wasp*). This information arouses the call-taker’s joking aside that the dispatcher has formulated the information so that it seems that the victim is a wasp (lines 17-22).

If we consider this extract from the point of view of the actor’s agency – and

therefore consider each actor individually in terms of his/her ability to control his/her behaviour, the way in which his/her actions have consequences for other actors, and possible assessment of the action performed – we would think of an evident asymmetry of knowledge, power and control. The dispatcher resembles a simple sounding box which repeats item-by-item over the radio the information provided by the call-taker. [3] Only the call-taker appears to be the repository of information: she decides the gravity of the incident; only she has the relevant information; she is the author of the dispatcher's communication, and she is responsible for it. The dispatcher seemingly acts only as a 'ventriloquist's dummy'.

However, matters change if we examine the extract in terms of the interaction system. Just as examination of the official record of the dispatch (the transcript of the radio communication alone) does not bring out the collective collaboration which makes the work at the emergency call-centre possible, so an approach centred exclusively on agency fails to grasp how the interaction system works. Only by analysing the situation as a whole is it possible to appreciate the subtle coordination work performed by physically co-present actors engaged in a common task. From this point of view, it does not make a great deal of sense to talk of an actor's greater or lesser freedom of action unless consideration is made of the constant work of reciprocal adjustment performed by the participants in order to anticipate each other's relevant actions and possible future moves.

3.3. Coordination and collaboration

The dispatcher's initial turn (at line 3) begins while her colleague is still dealing with the telephone request for assistance. The structure of the turn shows that

anticipation of the alternative actions possible at this point (*shall we send the ambulance car?*) is not a generic question (like, for instance, *what can we do now?*). Coordination between the parties assumes a markedly temporal and sequential character. The call-taker furnishes the information items required by the dispatcher (the gravity of the incident; where it has occurred; what has happened) in positions immediately antecedent to their relevance for the dispatch – that is, the work being performed by the dispatcher on the radio (line 4; line 8; line 12). The call-taker's information items are sequentially positioned: they are not packaged into a single communication format but they match step-by-step the sequence of the communication going on via radio. The call-taker subtly guides the dispatcher by slightly anticipating the information content, positioning it at the appropriate point and waiting for the next slot in which to insert the next item of information. The dispatcher for his part systematically anticipates his colleague's turn in order to speak on the radio, thereby establishing the rhythm of the face-to-face interaction. At the same time he elicits further information from the call-taker by stopping at the appropriate point (e.g. line 11), thereby orienting her attention and obtaining the further information. The intonation pattern of the dispatcher's turn (rising tone, line 11) indicates to the call-taker that the dispatch has not been completed and that a further item of information is required. All this takes place within the time-frame of the ongoing emergency event. Hence every decision about what to do and how to do it is compressed: decisions must be taken immediately; knowing what to do must be almost entirely co-extensive with its being done.

The system of the ongoing interaction enables account to be taken of this

important temporal compression of the event, and of the type of work normally performed in contexts of this kind. Direct communication about the event between the two operators overlaps with the communication (mediated and at a distance) between one of the operators and the ambulance car. The transfer of relevant information from the call-taker (the informant) to the dispatcher (the informee) does not precede the phase when the dispatcher issues instructions to the ambulance car crew. The information is not first 'received' and then 'codified' and transformed into instructions. The process takes place *almost* instantaneously. It is fluid and efficient: no pause or interruption breaks the flow of the collective action. The outcome is a complex and interconnected system of professional practices produced within the imposed time-frame, where the temporal dimension is both 'external' to the interaction (the event's nature as an *emergency*) and internal to it.

These are some aspects that an approach centred only on agency, of individualist and voluntaristic type, seems unable to grasp to their full extent.

4. Results and discussions

The work of Goffman, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis can be considered for a dissolution of the agency/structure dichotomy (Giglioli 1990), (Rawls 2003).

Goffman's work in its entirety is devoted to analysing social interaction, or in other words, situations in which at least two persons are present (Goffman 1964). Goffman is not interested in individuals (even less in social groups); rather he analyses social interaction, that is, the behaviour of people when they are in immediate physical co-presence – people who may not know each other and may not

share any substantial beliefs. Goffman's starting-point is not psychology but the rules that regulate how people address each other in face-to-face interaction. His most innovative input to sociological tradition consists in his contention that face-to-face interaction is an autonomous order of phenomena which cannot be explained by resorting either to individual psychology or to the socio-economic structures that sociology uses to explain large-scale phenomena.

Goffman maintains that if we consider the specific social setting of talking, for instance, we find that this setting is subject to its own 'rules' and is to some extent free from the restrictions and constraints of the broader social structure (Goffman 1964). This specific social setting is the *situation* – a context of interaction in which systemic relations of mutual influence apply even between those who speak and those who do not, or among onlookers who are not ratified participants in the situation.

Like Goffman, also ethnomethodology gives much importance to social relations in co-presence. But the crucial aspect for ethnomethodology is the work performed by co-members in order to make their action comprehensible to others, not the choreographic work that they perform to ritually honour the selves of the co-participants (Garfinkel 2002). This is above all work involving collective orientation in the situation and perception of the salient features of what is happening. This collective orientation and perception of the situation have nothing to do with conscious and alert individuals with full control over conditions and the environment. As Schutz stresses, as well as numerous ethnomethodological studies, communication in action, mutual understanding, and the sharing of a common basis for action depend on a 'swarm' of indexical details which orient

understanding and perception in context without these extending beyond the conscious domain (Schütz 1944). The gestures and actions of a musician, for example (Schütz 1951), are public instructions on what he is about to do, and they are considered (unconsciously) by the other musicians in order to anticipate what he will do next. According to Schutz, similar phenomena occur in conversation as well.

A large part of the work of conversation analysts consists in documenting the important role of even very subtle and delicate aspects of interaction in orienting our perceptions and directing our understanding when we talk to someone.

Broadly speaking, if we want to study interaction processes, the notion of agency seems to be a classic ‘red herring’ (Loyal and Barnes 2001) in that it induces us to focus on an individual acting subject rather than consider the systemic dimension of interaction processes. Thus attributed to the individual acting subject is a control and decision power which is described as features of his/her subjective and reflexive deliberation when they instead to a large extent pertain to the situation. The matter cannot be resolved by positing different *degrees* of agency, or the subject’s greater or lesser freedom of choice among different behaviours. The subjects engaged in an interaction do not simply have an audience which witnesses a performance; they are involved in mechanisms of expectation and feedback, anticipation and retroaction, which are locally and temporally situated. These ‘homeostatic’ mechanisms concern all the persons who are physically co-present. The level of reciprocal integration and collective coordination increases when these persons are not only physically co-present but share a common purpose by performing an activity in concert.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I maintain that the notion of agency is inadequate for the analysis of interaction processes. Agency may be considered a *resource* by members of a culture who use it to explain and describe forms of intentionality, creativity and choice by themselves or other members; [4] but it does not seem to me an analytical notion that can be used by a social researcher studying processes of interaction. That said, I hope that the scope of this paper is now clear. “Doing without agency” does not refer to the work of emergency call-centre operators. It is not they who forgo agency: it is the analyst. It is not that the operators – and in the cases described the dispatcher in particular – display ‘gregarious’ and ‘passive’ behaviour. Some cases may appear to be examples of agency-zero in which a person has a minimal degree of control over his/her behaviour and verbal output – a person who repeats word-for-word what others say; a sort of ‘ventriloquist’s dummy’, a sounding board without responsibility or authorship. It is not this that emerges. But at the same time I do not wish to stress the creative and ingenious nature of their behaviour *without acknowledging the behaviour of their colleagues, the tasks that they are performing, and the ecological setting of their action*. Taking account of these aspects shifts the analytical focus from the individual and his/her strategies of action to the broader context of situation and the syntactic relations among the participants in the interaction.

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Notes

- [1] This call corresponds to the summons issued by the ring of the telephone.
- [2] I call it a 'perceived perception' because the dispatch is clearly not concluded. The items in the dispatch consist of the urgency code for the incident, the place where it has occurred, and therefore where the ambulance car should go, and the type of incident. One element is obviously still missing: the perception of a suspension. That this is a suspension perceived not by the analyst but by the actors themselves is evident from the rest of the interaction.
- [3] Goffman says that the speaker in a sense of a "sounding box" "can share this physical function with a loudspeaker system or a telephone" (p. 144).
- [4] The distinction between topic and resource is long-standing feature of ethnomethodology (Zimmerman & Pollner 1971).