How real people communicate

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Complaints are ubiquitous in everyday life. We tell complaints to our friends and family, we complain to the doctor about our symptoms, and we complain to public services to get the bins collected. Despite each of us complaining multiple times a day in a variety of settings, little research in psychology investigates how we actually accomplish complaints in real time, and for what purpose.

We often imagine complaints to be vitriolic diatribes, an image recently fueled, perhaps, by interest in internet trolls. Self-help manuals (and the internet) abound with advice concerning complaints, such as how to avoid them, how a manager should deal with them, and how to make them in an effective, ‘constructive’ way. All this advice assumes we are not already excellent, practiced complainers, and this is utterly false. We are highly sensitive to how and to whom we complain. All you have to do is look at real conversations and examine real, naturally occurring complaints; conversation analysts have been doing just that for decades, showing how deftly humans manage the social challenges associated with making complaints.

For example, we must appear to be disinterested and reasonable complainers, without a personal stake in the matter, or else our complaint may be treated as characteristic of a personal vendetta (Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005). We must also be careful to avoid being seen as people who complain all the time, lest we be treated as ‘whingers’ or ‘moaners’ (Edwards, 2005). Patients cannot visit their doctor about any old thing – they regularly give special attention in presenting their symptoms to showing their current concern is serious, not personally motivated, and not imagined (Heritage & Robinson, 2006). Further, callers to hotlines typically try to show they have attempted to help themselves before calling (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007), suggesting one only has the right to complain after taking reasonable precautions.

My own research shows two examples of the trickiness of complaining. The first involves visiting the local MP surgery (see Hofstetter, 2016). Citizens can visit their local Member of Parliament to discuss a wide variety of concerns. It is typically assumed that people visit to argue about politics. However, there is a problem! Presenting concerns about national-level policy amounts to complaining directly to the person about whom you are complaining. This kind of complaint is very rare, and most conversation data shows third-party complaints, where a person complains about someone who is not present (see Heinemann, 2009). How do constituents get around this?

For starters, few present political concerns – only 12% of the encounters in the dataset involved presenting a complaint that clearly involved national politics. Of the remaining conversations, we can look at the data to see how carefully the constituents managed the challenge of complaining directly to a person implicated in the complaint. The constituent (C2) in the extract below is speaking to the MP and the caseworker (CW) about difficulties in receiving a carer’s allowance. She has had to return to work in addition to caring for an ill partner, and arrives at a complaint about the recent change in pension age.

Extract 1: The big black hole
1  C2:    I’ve had to go back to working five days,
Having to go back to work full time is already a problem, because of needing to be at home caring for her partner. This issue might have been more manageable if they could have relied upon a pension, or a soon-to-arrive pension. However, the government recently moved the pension age forward for her age bracket, moving that possible relief out of sight. The MP was part of the government that enacted that policy. Note, though, that C2 does not state the MP’s involvement in the policy. In fact, C2 omits any mention of the government at all. The pension has ‘been moved’ (Lines 9-10) by an unstated force. By stating the issue in this way, C2 avoids implicating the MP directly in the complaint, and thus also avoids breaking the interactional norm. C2 also uses other conversational strategies that have been documented to mitigate the potential aggressiveness of this complaint, such as using laughter particles (Lines 10, 12; see Potter & Hepburn, 2010).

The MP’s response to the complaint demonstrates his interpretation of the complaint as political through references to the government sorting out the budget (‘we’re trying to sort out… the big black hole’, Lines 18-19). His response also helps reduce his agency in the decision, both by treating the decision as forced (by the black hole), and the omission of who exactly made the ‘Difficult- difficult choices’ (Line 25). C2 accepts the response enough to move the conversation forward (‘But I say…’, Line 31), and the topic is abandoned.

When looking at thousands of these turns in the constituency office setting, it becomes clear that speakers prioritize these interactional rules over any potential issue. Constituents bring very dire
situations, including life-altering income problems such as the above, but they never complain about the MP’s role in political changes that have brought about their grievance. Despite the high stakes in getting their complaint addressed, constituents still find ways to complain while following the interactional norms, rather than arguably more ‘direct’ practices.

However, there is one place that I am studying where complaints are regularly directed at the person who has committed the transgression: during board game play (Robles & Hofstetter, 2017). Examining such sequences can help provide a contrast to the rare occurrences elsewhere. In the following game, players try to take each other’s pieces. To do so, they make formations – as if playing checkers, but with the requirement that a player makes a ‘square’ shape or some such before taking all the pieces surrounding it. As a result, if one player can successfully disrupt another player’s shape before it is finished, then they get a big advantage. The next extract begins after Adam does just such a move to John, taking an important one of John’s pieces.

Extract 2: What the game is all about

1 Joh: ahhhhhh "man:::,° (0.8) hHo:::#
2 (1.0)
3 Joh: You have no idea how much that impacted [me.°
4 Ad: [t(h)ahh (0.4)
5 °I ‡don’t actually,"°
6 (0.9)
7 Joh: .hhhhh ahhh
8 (1.6)
9 Joh: °°I was gonna do° ‡so many cool things°
10 Ad: I know- >well that’s what I felt like the first two turns too,
11 Joh: Ye(h)ah,
12 (0.9)
13 Joh: .hh No# that’s good. (0.4) That’s good.

John gives an extended set of complaints, through pain-like moan sounds (Lines 1, 7), to describing the extremity of the event (Line 3), to the denial of his clever plans (Line 9). Adam denies knowledge of the effect of his move (Line 5), and also points to earlier complainable situations he had faced (Line 10), both of which suggest that John’s complaint, and/or its extremity, is unwarranted, and at least that Adam is not accountable to the degree John implies. Ultimately John backtracks, saying ‘that’s good’ (Line 13): Adam’s move is acceptable, and in doing the utterance, accepted.

Complaint sequences as above are unusual because John is expressing his complaint directly to Adam (note, though, that John still phrases the transgressive action as ‘that’, rather than ‘you’ in Line 3, both of which were possible). The result is that both Adam and John end up negotiating how ‘problematic’ Adam’s action was. It is common in these data for the complainer to back down after these discussions, and the game action is never undone. Even more remarkable is that when complaint sequences are entirely absent after an adverse game event (like taking someone’s piece), long discussions (too long to reproduce here) often ensue that pursue information about how the adverse event affected the player! In other words, the complaint appears to be necessary – an indication that the game action has had the intended competitive effect. A lack of complaint suggests either a lack of successful effect, or a lack of genuine participation and investment in the game. As such, despite the interactional challenges, some complaining may be central to competitive game play. The interaction (rather than the game
actions) provides the feedback players need to successfully construct the competitive environment.

It may be tempting to dismiss the games as low-stakes, imaginary scenarios where interactional rules would not apply anyway, but this is not the case. Players follow other rules very carefully, such as delicately navigating when to give advice to a less experienced player (or to avoid it and let them learn or act independently). The game refocuses attention on collaboratively completing the competition. To compete effectively involves showing effort, interest, and engagement with the competition itself, and that requires demonstrating that an adverse event was indeed adverse. Complaints are an effective way to accomplish this display. Note that this also means complaints can be used in a subversive way, misdirecting players with an exaggerated complaint and exploiting the misdirection later.

In summary, despite popular suggestions to the contrary, we are very good at navigating the tricky territory that complaining brings. Complaints even have a central role in managing certain interactions, such as service encounters, but also, perhaps surprisingly, competitive play. The ingredients of complaining, as seen in conversational data, structure these interactions in specific ways. Complaining is so commonplace it can be easily overlooked, but it is an essential component to getting things done in these social settings. In looking at data such as the above, we can see what real complaint strategies achieve.

References