# Narratives in the Wild: From Conversation Analytic Research on Community Mediation to UK Policy Impact

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## ABSTRACT

Conflict and dispute often manifest as competing stories. The 'facts' of the matter are constructed through narrative, but once established, the 'construction yard' of unfolding stories falls away (1). As Roberts points out, '(f)acts are inert without narratives and worldviews to render them legible' (2). One setting in which narratives compete is mediation, where two or more parties in dispute tell their stories, facilitated by a mediator, with the aim of resolving things without going to court. However, for mediation to be effective, disputing parties must first agree to mediate, and engagement can be a challenge. In this article, I describe a project in which I identified what works to engage potential clients of mediation in the initial conversations they have on the telephone with mediators. Not only do callers' stories about their dispute matter greatly in these first conversations, but mediators' own narrative descriptions of the process itself are crucial to whether callers become clients. Based on identifying and describing effective mediation narratives, I report how the work was used to change the way the UK Ministry of Justice explained mediation across a national communication campaign.

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# INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have always been interested in stories. Indeed, a large subset of research treats narrative as the primordial organising and sense-making framework of social life. For many, it is through narrative that 'individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they come, they are their stories' (3, p. 388). If people 'are their stories', it makes sense that (loosely 'social constructionist') notions of narrative and identity have found their way into narrative therapy (4, 5), narrative-based medicine (6), and – relevant to the current paper – narrative mediation (7).

People's accounts of their world, their experience, their views, and so on, populate research interviews and focus groups. These come to comprise the most common qualitative approach to collecting social scientific accounts of the world. Social scientists have brought narrative methods into their own toolkit, both for collecting interview material (8, 9) and for analysing interview and other textual data (10, 11). A common critique of interview-based data, however, is that they are often treated as 'surrogates for the observation of actual behaviour' (12, pp. 2, 11). In other words, narrative approaches seldom consider *as part of their analysis* (notwithstanding whatever caveats the researcher may offer) the situated, artefactual nature of researcher-elicited accounts. Although not all analysts treat narrative interview data this way (13), and not all use interview materials (14), studies of interviewer-prompted narratives make it difficult to see what people are *doing* when they tell stories and, therefore, what stories are *designed* to do. As Schegloff argues, the interview situation 'plays havoc with the motive force of the telling – the action and interactional precipitant of the telling – by making the elicitation itself the invariant occasion for telling the story' (15, pp. 99–10).

In contrast, the approach taken in this paper is based in conversation analysis (CA), a six-decades-old field of observational 'cumulative science' (16, p. 348), which collects and analyses naturally occurring social interaction 'in the wild'. CA is not just a method but 'a recognizably distinct approach to the analysis of social life' (17, p. 300). Despite being unfamiliar to many social scientists, its foundational papers are some of the most highly cited in any academic discipline (18). CA's roots include the work of Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman, whom Heritage credits with 'inaugurat[ing] the study of everyday life as a research focus in its own right' (18, p. 301). In developing CA, its founder, Harvey Sacks, aimed to develop a science of social action that could be grounded in the 'details of actual events' (19, p. 26). CA therefore uses audio and/ or video recordings of everyday interactions as data and, with constant improvements and technological innovation, captures increasingly complex interactional environments (20).

# MEDIATION AND NARRATIVES IN THE WILD

Mediation provides a 'perspicuous setting' (21) for studying narratives 'in the wild', since it comprises the elicitation of competing stories from people in conflict. Mediators attempt to support the parties in coming to their own resolution instead of escalating the dispute to court or other legalistic proceedings, where a third party decides whose narrative 'wins'. Mediators work in many settings and organisations, including as community and neighbourhood mediators, family mediators, workplace mediators and civil and commercial mediators.

There is a vast literature on mediation, from articulating its core values to evaluating different practice models; from identifying different mediator styles and techniques to the factors that lead to success; and from psychological and behavioural benefits to matters of ethics and power imbalance (22, 23). Within this literature, there is far less on what mediation actually looks like, with most research, as with the social sciences broadly, focusing on post-hoc researcher-based accounts of mediation (or simulations in the lab) rather than on what actually happens in mediation itself, where the stakes are real and live.[1]

Extract 1 shows the opening of a mediation session, coming from an ongoing dispute between three residents of a sheltered housing development. Two mediators are present. The audio recording was collected in situ by the mediators, having gained consent from all parties, and was transcribed verbatim, with certain sections transcribed using a technical approach developed for conversation analysis (30). The Jefferson system uses a modified orthography to represent the prosodic, paralinguistic, pace, placement, and perturbation resources through

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1     For exceptions, including CA-based research, see (24–29).

which people compose and make sense of talk and has been augmented to include embodied conduct and multimodality.[2] While the transcripts can be tricky for a non-specialist, akin to reading music notation without training, they are designed to preserve as much of the way talk and other conduct (if accessible from video data) are actually delivered. It is precise enough to encompass all the detail – every breath, hesitation, restart, intonation shift, overlap, etc. – that people use in conversation. This is another way in which CA contrasts with much qualitative research, which, while aiming to empower participants and elicit 'rich' data, often strips away the detail that participants themselves (including interviewers) put into their interactions (32).

Extract 1 is interesting because it demonstrates the power of stories and of storytelling itself, including who gets to speak and who gets to speak first (and potentially 'anchor' the upcoming negotiation) (33, 34). It also shows that, and how, stories must be folded into an unfolding interactional machinery of turn-taking. Finally, it shows that the notion of narrative structure, and that there is a time, place and order to narratives, are resources in themselves. In the transcript,[3] M1 (Joe) and M2 (Lucy) are (pseudonymised) mediators; G (Gary), M (Macy) and H (Henry) are the (pseudonymised) parties in dispute over the communal garden. The parties have attempted previously to resolve their dispute, which centres around some flowers and bushes that Macy has planted. Several months later, the dispute has started again. We join the encounter almost at the start, as M1 reminds the parties how mediation works.

```
01   M1:   T'REMIND you ↑very quickly: (0.2) we do four things: what's the
02          problem, each person gets a chance to say what the problem is
03          uninterrupted, cos the main thing is the other people are really
04          listening hard.=that's why they [won't] interrupt?
05   G:                                    [Yeah ]
06              (0.3)
07   G:    *Su[re*
08   M1:     [Then what are the feeli:ngs?
09              (0.2)
10   M1:   That's the pa:st, then we're l- lookin' at the future.
11              (0.7)
12   M1:   <What: things> d'you want to happe:n?
13              (1.3)
14   M1:   In the future that'll improve for you? ↓an' we write the li:st down,
15          .hh an' we pick things from the list an' ag-gree them or- change
16          them or alter them or negotiate them: t'we get things we agree. hh
17              (0.8)
18   M1:   Sometimes people ↑don't agree: (0.6) but we have a go.
19              (0.6)
20   M1:   An': last time you made an agreement: an' it looks as if it lasted
21          for a little while anyway.
22              (0.4)
23   M1:   But I don't [know about that.]
24   H:               [ Lasted      for ] about uh:: (0.4) eight months.
25              (0.4)
26   M1:   Well that was: (.) maybe eight months that was:better than it
27          might've been [if you hadn't (  )]
28   G:                  [I   h a d     a: ] two hundred and fifty pound
29          bike destroyed, by [uh: either her or Henry:,
30   M1:                       [>Yep<
31   M1:   Yep [we are not ready yet] not ready yet, we're not ready=
32   H:       [You must be jo:kin'.]
33   M1:   ='avent't started yet.
34              (1.0)
35   M1:   We need some ground rules (1.1) uh: (0.3) like we had the ↓last
36          time.
37              (0.3)
38   M1:   Ye:ah, these are the little [rules (   )]
39   H:                               [In order.]
40              (0.7)
41   M1:   WELL:: th- the first one is (0.6) listen, (2.1) and don't interrupt.
42          Okay?
43              (0.8)
44   G?:   ((coughs))
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(Contd.)

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2   For an overview, see (31).

3   Briefly, gaps between turns and pauses within turns are timed to the nearest tenth of a second (e.g., 0.3 at line 06); the onset and end of overlapping talk is marked with square brackets; talk that is slower or faster than surrounding talk is enclosed by <greater than> or >less than< signs; question marks indicate rising intonation (not necessarily a question); full stops indicate falling intonation; commas indicate continuing intonation (as in reading items in a list); and underlining indicates emphasis.

```
45                (0.7)
46   M1:   Because we're not just here to tell our sto:ries,
47   G:    ↑No- I'm- certainly: [sayin' that. yeah.
48   M1:                        [We're here for repe- everybody to li:sten to
49         our stories.=cos this is where you find out things you mebbe didn't
50         know before.=Listen and don't interrupt, ((continues))
```

Between lines 01 and 16, M1 summarises the basic steps of mediation. Note that the first component, 'each person gets a chance to say what the problem is', is expanded upon in ways that the other components are not, with particular focus on turn-taking and participation, including being 'uninterrupted' and 'listening hard'. Already we can identify a potential issue for the mediators since Gary – while confirming his alignment to these rules (lines 05 and 07) – does so by interrupting M1 on line 05. At this point, the mediators could do several different things. They could comment on Gary's interruption; they could check in explicitly with Henry and Macy to get their equivalent confirmations 'on record', or they could do what happens here – simply ignore Gary and continue. This might seem like a small detail, but mediators are committed to impartiality and explicitly state this principle in their explanations of mediation, as we will see below. Embodying it from the outset is important. However, at this point, the parties are beginning to learn that if one party jumps in – even enthusiastically and positively – the mediators will not necessarily level the interactional floor by asking others to confirm and convey, tacitly, that this will happen every time.

A further thing to observe in this encounter is Gary's second interruption at lines 28–29, where he reports the destruction of his bike and accuses 'either her [Macy] or Henry:'. This report is designed as an account for why the eight-month agreement that the parties had previously drawn up had failed to last. At line 30, M1 interrupts Gary with a rapid acknowledgement of his grievance but tries to reestablish his current activity of setting the ground rules for the mediation (lines 31–33). At line 32, Henry interrupts M1 to express his astonishment at Gary's accusation, which is also a tacit denial ('You must be jo:kin''). M1, now back 'in the clear' (i.e., speaking without being interrupted), informs the parties that 'we're not ready' and "aven't started yet'. Towards the end of the extract, M1 struggles to maintain control of articulating the 'ground rules' and to emphasise that everyone should listen to each other's 'stories' (lines 35–50), with Gary jumping in again (line 47).

Thus, we see how difficult it can be to ensure that storytelling can take place smoothly and fairly within the rapid pace of social interaction. Calls to move to the primary inquiry, which is the focus of the rest of this paper, reveal this difficulty in the context of when mediation clients get to speak and how they obey the institutional rules about the correct time, place and order to tell their story.

Extract 2 comes from a call from a man who has reported 'verbal abuse by a new neighbour' who has built an extension with a window that overlooks the caller's property. We join the call just after the mediator has gained consent to record the call and formulates what she takes to be the caller's reason for calling: that mediation 'might be um:: (0.4) the route for you'.

```
01   M:    Okay. .hhh ↑so ↑um:: (1.0) *uh:::* (0.4) y'thi:nk that media:tion
02         might be um:: (0.4) the [route for you.]
03   C:                           [(        )]
04                  (0.3)
05   C:    What happened- myse:lf an':: my nei:ghbour which is fourte:en: (0.5) uh
06         (0.4) twelve Queen Victoria    Street hh (0.7) went down because- .hh (0.2)
07         what it is um: (0.2) well I'll start wi- start from the begin[ning.]
08   M:                                                                 [.hhh ] ↑W'll u-
09         um: actually you do:n't need to mister Albert.=all I- I only need some uh
10         very basic details:.so that um: .hh an' then I can tell you a little bit about:
11         mediation. [.hhh
12   C:               [Oh right then.=
13   M:    =And then (.) um:: (0.4) all the details you can actually: (0.3) uh:: that's
14         what you'll speak to the mediators abou'.
15   C:    Right
```

**Extract 2** Initial mediation inquiry.

From my analysis of hundreds of intake calls, callers rarely, if ever, call simply to make an appointment with a mediator or to ask directly for mediation. They appear not to know enough about mediation to ask for it and have frequently called somewhere else first (e.g., the police,

the council, a lawyer, environmental health services), (35) which often reveals the preferred solution to their problem (that the neighbour be arrested, evicted, taken to court, or have their behaviour constrained in some way). In the above extract, at line 05 (and possibly earlier at line 03; the empty parentheses indicate inaudible/indecipherable talk, which often occurs in overlap), C is not ready to confirm that mediation is the 'route' for him; rather, C begins to expand on the circumstances of the dispute by telling a story. Furthermore, C refers explicitly to the storytelling process at line 07 by abandoning and attempting to restart the narrative: 'well I'll start wi- start from the beginning'. At the earliest possible point without interrupting him (M takes an audible in-breath to begin her turn in overlap at line 08), M forestalls further expansion of C's story by invoking the purpose of this initial call – that only 'very basic details' are needed at this point and should be saved for when C meets mediators at the start of the process proper. She also informs C that she will next tell him 'a little bit about mediation'.

The fact that callers do not seek mediation appointments in these calls and often appear uninformed about its purpose means that mediators almost always must indeed explain 'a little bit about mediation'. An example is presented in Extract 3, which comes from a call to another mediation centre. We join the call as the mediator moves into the phase of the call where such explanations of mediation occur.

```
01    M:    ↑Wh- ↑wha- what usually ha:ppens i:s that the mediators would come out
02          an' (0.5) uh- see you fi:rst an' hear your side o'the story. .hhh=
03    C:    =°Yeh°
04    M:    =um: I'mean if still:* wanted to continue we'd write out t'y'r neighbour.=.
05          hh an' offer 'im a similar appointment, (.) .hhh (.) uh: t'hear what's hap'nin'
06          from 'is point of view. .hh um::
07                (1.0)
08    M:    I mean he can say no: but *you- y- y-* [...]
09    C:    ↑Is there uh anyone e:lse that I c'n call.=is there else that I c'n do: hhh
10          becau-I really don't think that's goin't'work, .hhh
```

Note that, in her narration of the mediation process, M explicitly uses the idiomatic expression 'sides of a story'. In response, C produces a minimal but aligning acknowledgement – 'Yeh' – to the notion that the mediators first see her and hear her side (note the continuer at line 03), she remains silent (line 07) in response to the idea that mediation involves listening to her neighbour's 'point of view' (line 06). In response to C's silence, M takes the next turn and begins to offer an easy 'out' for the caller, which is often pre-emptively suggested by the callers themselves: that the other party might say 'no'. Indeed, one of the most commonly articulated barriers to mediation comes from callers stating that their neighbour is exactly the kind of person who will not participate in the process (35). Here, not only does the mediator fail to overcome such a barrier, but actually offers it to the caller, who develops an assessment that mediation is unlikely to work (line 10).

## FROM RESEARCH TO TRAINING

I started working with mediators in 1997. My initial research interest was not in mediation but in neighbour relationships. As a psychologist, I noticed that within the literature on interpersonal relationships, there was barely anything about neighbours. To investigate neighbour relationships 'in the wild', I started collecting television documentaries, talk shows, and radio call-ins about 'neighbours from hell' and 'neighbours at war'. These data provided insights into the reported origins and escalation of people's disputes (35) but were insufficient for a full project. I therefore began to approach community mediation services to ask if they might record encounters between mediators and clients. Some agreed, and, over a period of five years, I collected a small corpus of the meetings that occurred between mediators and individual parties to the dispute, as well as 'round table' mediations themselves (as in Extract 1). However, most services did not want to record, often citing the reluctance of clients to participate or concerns about the confidentiality of the process.

Building relationships helped, however. One of the mediation services was enthusiastic about the research and, while reluctant to record actual mediation, offered to record inquiry telephone calls into their offices, subject to consent. For mediators, these calls were not 'mediation proper', and so they were less concerned about a researcher studying them. From my perspective, the data were an ideal, self-contextualising, 'naturally occurring survey' of the reported causes of

disputes. Other services also agreed to record initial inquiries, and I quickly grew a corpus of several hundred calls and received ESRC funding to conduct the project.

As it turned out, despite being 'second best' from the perspective of mediators, initial inquiry calls were crucial to the later impact of this research. Towards the end of the funded project in 2008, my focus began to shift. Although feeding back findings to project partners was a formal obligation, I had, by then, built a network of mediators who I cared about. Furthermore, without being able to articulate it at the time, I felt that 'those who contributed to the underpinning research as participants should benefit in some tangible way from downstream impact generation' (36). In October 2008, I was invited to speak at a practitioner event for mediators. I presented aspects of the research that I had come to focus on, including why callers did not become clients of the mediation service by the end of their conversation. The calls I had collected provided the basis for not just a 'naturally occurring survey' of the reported causes of disputes, but for a 'naturally occurring experiment' in which the effectiveness or otherwise of each thing the mediators said – building to whether callers say 'yes' to mediation – was evident within the call itself.

Until this point, intake calls had received no attention from either researchers or the mediation industry, in the UK or internationally. But because services secure funding based partly on recognised need, it is crucial that mediators successfully convert callers into clients. My research revealed several ways through which callers resisted participating in mediation. For example, when mediators formulated a routine question for callers about what they had done to try to resolve the dispute (37), callers' responses typically reported failed attempts to talk to their neighbours, thus justifying the reason for seeking outside help. But these question-generated narratives, which often invoked the character of the caller's neighbour (e.g., 'she's the kind of person you can't talk to'), undermined subsequent offers of mediation as a talk-based solution. I also showed that the way meditators both explained and displayed impartiality could act as barriers against callers agreeing to mediate (35). Slowly, I built up a stock of research-based practices, which I referred to as 'trainables', to enable mediators to better engage callers and convert them into clients: a bottom-line issue for services.

This research fed into the development of a training approach that I called the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM) (38, 39), the development and rollout of which was supported by ESRC 'follow-on' funding.[4] A workshop is developed by selecting extracts from research findings about effective and less effective practices, which become the 'trainables'. Animation software is then used to play the audio (or video) and Jefferson (30) transcript synchronously. Workshop participants live through conversations without knowing what is coming next, and then 'role-play' what they might do next to handle the situation. If party A makes a particular comment, how might party B respond most appropriately? Participants discuss the likely next turns in small groups and then with the whole group. Next, party B's actual response is played. Small groups discuss what party B did and again discuss it with the whole group. Participants experience different trajectories of response, identifying effective practice based on what actually happens.

In 2008, I initiated the types of events that would become CARM. In my grant application, I pitched to deliver 36 workshops to services in the UK and USA: one general and one bespoke, depending on what services were most interested in. By 2012, when the second funding period ended, I had unintentionally created demand for training on intake calls. I was invited to join the board of the UK College of Mediators and had CARM accredited for Continuing Professional Development. Extract 4 provides a further example of what we encountered in Extract 3, a mediator launching a narrative explanation of mediation.

```
01    M:    What we do as a mediation service we: um: (1.1)
02          we help people: (.) sort out- (0.4) their own uh
03          differences so .hhh we wouldn't take si:des,
04          we wouldn't- .h (0.7) try an' decide who's right
05          or wrong but would- .hh would try to help you
06          both um:: (0.8) sort out uh: the differences
07          between: (0.2) between you.
```

**Extract 4a** Community mediation initial inquiry call.

The mediator explains mediation in terms of its principles and their role as someone who listens without 'taking sides', thereby explicitly formulating their impartiality. In a CARM workshop, mediators discuss this approach and consider what might happen next. What happens next is then revealed:

<pre>
08                              (2.5)
</pre>

By this point in a CARM workshop, participants know that a 2.5-second gap is not just interesting (and painful – in the workshop I animate the science with the sound of wind and a tumbleweed) but indicative of a negative upcoming response. Here is the delayed response.

<pre>
09      C:      Well I-hh (1.2) to be qui:te honest I don't think she'd cooperate.
</pre>

Line 09 provides another example of how callers resist mediation by hypothesising that their neighbours, rather than themselves, would be unlikely to participate. When mediators are unable to overcome such resistance, they lose potential clients.

Yet mediators can overcome such resistance. Below, in Extract 5, another mediator is explaining mediation.

<pre>
01      M:      .hh okay w'll we're a (.) we're a mediation projec- project
02              in the:: (.) Stockham area,
03                      (0.2)
04      C:      Ye[h.
05      M:        [.hhh and what – (0.2) we try t'help neighbours that are in dispute::,
06              [.hhh what we do first um:  .pt send a letter out to your neighbour=
07      C:      [Uhuh.
08      M:      =straight away .hhh t'say that: y- we've been in touch with you,
09              .h[hh  and hm- askin' (0.2) whether they would  (0.4) .hhh get in=
10      C:        [Yeh,
11      M:      =touch with us so that we can discuss it with them? Hh=
12      C:      =Yeh,
13      M:      If they sa::y- if they phone up an' say yes then we make an arrangement t'
14              come an' see you both separately, .hhhhh [but with (0.3) but with the=
15      C:                                              [Yes.
16      M:      =aim of: (0.2) <eventually> gettin' (0.3) round a table an' discussing
17              matters with you all,
18      C:      M[m:.
19      M:       [.hhh to try an' come t'some sort of an agree:ment of: ways you can go
20              fo:rward.
21                      (0.2)
22      C:      °Ri[ght.°
</pre>

Compared to Extracts 3 and 4, the differences are striking, not just in the content of the explanation (mediation is a process, not some principles) but also interactionally. In Extract 4a, the explanation is delivered in a long turn, with no continuers produced by the caller at relevant opportunities. In Extract 5a, the caller responds to components of the explanation with a continuer (lines 04, 07, 10, 12, 15, 18). Note that at line 16, the mediator precedes delivering the word 'eventually' with a 0.2s pause and delivers the word itself at a slower pace, perhaps orienting to this being the most worrisome part of the process and thereby emphasising its timing well into a hypothetical future. In so doing, the mediator displays her experience and expertise, something that can be drawn out in training. At line 18, the caller's response ('Mm:') indicates possible upcoming resistance by taking a different form of response to the mediator's explanation than previous continuers from the caller (cf. (40)).

Next, the mediator moves from explanation to asking the caller about her likely engagement in the process.

<pre>
23      M:      [.hhh ((cough)) does that sound .hhh like it might be helpful to you?
24                      (0.7)
25      C:      I- uh-  (0.2) it might be but um:: (0.3) I'm not too sure at this stage about
26              (0.6) you know, how long- i- seein' this: gi:rl, [at all,
27      M:                                                       [W'yeah.=
</pre>

I usually stop at each turn to see how participants think the mediator's question will be received, then the 0.7s silence, then the caller's response, sometimes taking the opportunity to point out that naturally occurring yes/no questions are not 'closed', as per standard communication

training discourse. I then ask them to consider how they can encourage the caller to become their client, explaining that this mediator will achieve a turnaround from incipient rejection to strong agreement to participate. Across hundreds of workshops, mediators rarely successfully hypothesise what happens next, even though it occurs regularly (29). This suggests that people are not good at recalling behaviour sufficiently to know what worked in these crucial moments, even if they do it in practice. This is what happens next:

```
28    M:    ↓Yeh, but you'd be willin' t'see two of our
29          media[tors jus' t'talk about it all. .hhhh   ]
30    C:          [         Oh of course. Yeah. Yeah] definitely.
31    M     Yeah.=all right my love, .hh um::  (0.5) .pt ↑WHen's the best
32          t(h)i(h)me for you t'be in.
```

When mediators ask callers if they are willing to mediate or propose that they are willing to mediate, callers are more likely to agree to mediate, especially after previous resistance.

This tiny fragment is packed with other important details that I discuss in CARM training. First, the caller responds positively before fully hearing what the mediator proposes. Second, the mediator is not asking a question but making a statement about the kind of person the caller is – the kind who would be willing to see mediators. Since callers take opportunities to characterise their neighbour as the kind of person who would not participate in mediation, the current caller, logically, as the aggrieved party, must be the kind who will. Third, the mediator does not say that they think the caller's neighbour is to blame for the dispute – they remain impartial. Finally, the caller's response is strongly positive. She does not just agree to mediate but starts by saying, 'Oh of course …'. A gloss might be: 'I was always willing – you did not need to ask'.

## FROM TRAINING TO (POLICY) IMPACT

Using the kind of 'trainables' described above, and by training over 4000 mediators (2008–) from community, family and other types of mediation across 200 services in the UK, USA and Australia, mediators have been helped to adopt practices more likely to encourage callers to agree to become clients. The UK College of Mediators reported that CARM training enabled them to 'make changes when we pick up the phone [and] get people in conflict and stress to the table to negotiate or mediate' (41). The reach of this impact was extended via a UK government campaign in 2014 to engage people in family mediation. Having seen me speak at a family law and mediation conference, where I was critical of the way in which the government explained mediation in promotional materials, the then Minister of Justice (MoJ) invited me to join a task force to write the text for a national campaign. The Deputy Director of Family Justice reported that as a 'direct consequence', the Ministry of Justice redesigned their 'promotional video and related leaflets/posters'. Changes included rewording statements such as '*It's up to you to make things work*' to '*Mediators help you to make things work*', foregrounding mediators in the process. Other changes included removing from the original video the practice of conveying information through a 'Frequently Asked Questions' format since almost all the FAQs had a negative response. For example, we swapped '*If we agree something, is it legally binding? No, mediation is about working towards solutions that you both agree and stick to, unlike a court order which tells you what you have to do*' with a positively-worded statement: '*Mediators help find solutions that you and your partner can agree upon and a court can make agreements legally binding*'.

The MoJ described their campaign as having an excellent 'return on investment, reaching large volumes of people over [its] duration'. The reach of the work was extended internationally, as the Superior Court for Washington DC, USA (which serves 5.3M citizens), who had previously invited me to deliver CARM training, also adopted the campaign using my text, creating versions for community and family mediation in English and Spanish. Furthermore, because some mediators work with or for the UK government-funded independent public body Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), I was invited to run regional CARM training events between 2014–2018. I was later contracted to train all senior advisors and all internal trainers across the organization (2019–2020) – 250 conciliators across England, Wales, and Scotland. The aim was to support conciliators who:

'have a tough time trying to persuade people that conciliation is a worthwhile process … conciliators have to repeat conversations which adds to time on the phone. And because government funding is becoming more limited over time, we must work as efficiently as possible'. ACAS's Chief Operations Officer reported that, following the training, conciliators changed the language and timing of service explanations leading to more 'efficient and seamless' calls (41).

One thing that is clear from these collaborative projects is that the insights from my research would have been unlikely to travel outside their place of academic publication – and therefore have had any impact – without what is termed, variously, 'public engagement', 'knowledge mobilisation', 'co-production', and so on. The MoJ testimonial underlined this important aspect, noting that I had managed to 'talk to a diverse audience and communicate sophisticated messages in a highly engaging way', create a 'buzz of inspiration and excitement… and instant demand for CARM', that I had strong relationships with mediators, and that there were 'some serious communication problems in the MoJ's marketing of family mediation in its promotional video'. At the end of the project, the MoJ also stated that 'other stakeholders, including medics and commercial firms, had been inspired by CARM's innovations'. Indeed, through science communication, public engagement, and multiple subsequent non-academic collaborations, conversation analytic research has achieved impact across jurisdictions and sectors, from healthcare to technology and from policing to sales (42).

In sum, this paper shows the value in paying close attention to the stories that are 'right under our noses, much more accessible than the recesses of our brains…and quite understudied' (43, p. 39). Focussing on narratives 'in the wild' enabled the development of an evidence base grounded in people's live disputes. Rather than ask people (citizens, mediators, lawyers, politicians) what kinds of messages they think would encourage participation in mediation, my research found a place where the stakes were real and immediate, in accounts produced in and for mediators rather than researchers, marketers, etc., and showed what actually works in the live, unfolding narration of conflicting stories.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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