Telling people what to do (and, sometimes, why): Contingency, entitlement and explanation in staff requests to adults with intellectual impairments

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Abstract

How do support staff resolve the interactional dilemma of getting their clients to do things, while respecting their independence? In a corpus of over 200 everyday requests made by residential home staff to adults with an intellectual impairment, the staff tended to use formats which claimed high entitlement to be obeyed, and made little acknowledgement of the contingencies facing their interlocutors. Bald imperatives were overwhelmingly the most common format used. The findings suggest that staff resolve the dilemma of care and control mostly in favour of getting jobs done, at the expense of residents' potential trouble in fulfilling their requests. In the rare cases where requests were accompanied by explanations, these legitimised the staff member's entitlement, or showed their awareness of the contingencies that could affect the resident's response: this provides useful evidence of the reality of these categories to the participants. We discuss three factors that might influence the degree of directiveness in the request: the physical immediacy of the action; a prior fault; and an obligation of the requester to instruct and socialise.
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1. Introduction

People can be requested to do things in a variety of ways. Two highly significant elements to the request, systematised by Curl and Drew (2008), are the degree of entitlement that the requester claims for themselves (a factor prefigured in Heinemann, 2006), and the degree to which the requester seems to appreciate the difficulties, or other contingencies, that might hinder the recipient performing the requested action. To take two invented examples, the imperative *do X!* claims greater entitlement, and less concern with the recipient's contingencies, than a formulation such as *I'd be grateful if you could do X*.

These elements are interactionally useful, as they allow the requester to adjust the exact wording of their request according to how much entitlement and allowance for contingency that they want to project. Curl and Drew (2008) show that the adjustment will be made in the light of the circumstances that the requester finds themselves in, *vis-à-vis* the request recipient. This tells us a great deal about the interactional status that both the requester and the request-recipient orient to. As we shall try to show in this article, it also gives us a sharp profile of the institutional world in which they live.

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1.1. Entitlement and contingency

As an illustration of the way the dimensions work, Curl and Drew (2008) show that, for example, if you make an out of hours call to the doctor, you may mark your lack of medical expertise, and the likelihood that your request will cause the doctor inconvenience by using an *I wonder if*... formulation (such as *I'm wonderin' if a doctor could call and see [name] please*). That shows your low entitlement in making the demand, and your lively awareness of the doctor's contingencies. Whether or not patients do or do not (really) have such a low entitlement – however that 'really' might be determined – the case is that, as the authors put it, people can ''construct themselves as potentially lacking entitlement'' (Curl and Drew, 2008:148). On the other hand, if one wants to project having a very good case for calling the doctor, one may use a request which hinges on a modal verb like *could, may* or *will* (for example: *can the doctor come out as soon as possible?*). This is less common in calls to the doctor than in calls to family member, where presumably one may have more grounds for signalling a greater expectation of one's wishes being satisfied, and less concern for the recipient's contingencies (to use an example from Curl and Drew: *can you come over in the morning?* Curl and Drew, 2008:137).

The great benefit of Curl and Drew's empirical, Conversation-Analytical approach is that it frees us from a priori estimates of face, or of speakers' pre-existing social roles, which can vitiate more traditional pragmatic treatments of requests (see Curl and Drew:130–135 for a fuller discussion of such problems). What the authors identify are displays, under the speaker's control, designed to meet the demands of the moment. Formats which display the requester's tentativeness, uncertainty and so on, or its opposite, mark the degree of the speaker's entitlement; formats which display their appreciation of the recipient's needs and wants, the troubles they might face, and so on, or fail to do so, mark the degree of their awareness of contingency.

By finding that such displays could be laid out on these two dimensions, Curl and Drew have given researchers a useful framework to consider what happens in various parts of the social world. Craven and Potter (2010) apply them to requests at family mealtimes; Aronsson and Cekaite (2011) to requests in family life more generally; and, in a different environment, Keisanen and Rauniomaa (forthcoming) to exchanges between car drivers and passengers. Attention is also being paid to entitlement and contingency in requests in the institutional world (see, for example, Kuroshima, 2009, on ordering in a restaurant; Lee, 2011 on airline service encounters, and Harris et al., 2011, on counselling). In this article we want to stay in the institutional world, and consider the case of requests made by staff members to adults with intellectual impairments. We shall see that the status of staff and residents – and the presumptions about the rights of one and the other – is sharply captured by the way the staff use entitlement and contingency in their requests.

1.2. The status of request recipients

We shall be looking at adults with intellectual disabilities, but is there any evidence already that it might matter to whom the request is made? Indeed there is. In studying parents' requests to their children, Craven and Potter (2010) reaffirm the utility of the Curl and Drew dimensions, but extend them to show that parents at mealtimes preferentially use more directives than requests, claiming still more entitlement and showing even less concern for their children's contingencies when compliance is not forthcoming. There were a great deal more examples of bald imperatives in the parents' talk – for example, *hold it with two hands* or *don't play* – which did not feature in Curl and Drew's adult data.

Intuitively, it seems likely that adults and children are treated differently when it comes to getting them to do something, and no doubt for multiple reasons. Strongly entitled directives fully restrict the response options to just compliance (sometimes through forced physical manipulation). This provides a very strong indicator to the recipient of what constitutes acceptable behaviour in that specific situation. In adult–adult conversation, entitled directives appear to be invasive and face threatening social actions (Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, the same might not necessarily be true for children. Among many other such sentiments, we might quote Shakespeare (1998) who points out that ''because children are not effectively full members, much of their lives is spent in social interactions that offer them directives concerning how to achieve full membership'' (1998:25). Having a clear steer towards an appropriate and acceptable response action may in fact facilitate successful participation in the interaction, and offer a scaffold around which the child can build their set of discursive resources. This gives us the background against which to ask what happens when the adults are people with intellectual impairments, who occupy an interactionally marginal social role, with some of the elements of childhood disentitlement and underprivilege. We should be careful in making any sort of equation between the abilities and experiences of children and adults with intellectual impairments – for one thing, the terms are too imprecise to allow any sensible tally – but in terms of their (attributed or allowed) rights and obligations, at least, some useful comparisons can be drawn (even so, this is still a large topic; for a view from an interactional perspective, see Williams, 2011).

This article, then, is an empirical investigation of a situation where the recipient of the request does not have the full range of cognitive competences of the typical adult. The question is: how do staff members treat them, when issuing requests? What entitlements to obedience, and what awareness of their clients' difficulties, do the staff display?