Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Loughborough University

Unit of Assessment: D36b Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

Title of case study: Improving telephone helpline effectiveness using new evidence-based training methods

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Members of Loughborough University's Helpline Research Unit (LUHRU) have been researching, evaluating and advising on helpline services since 2000. LUHRU research on the exchange of talk between callers and call-takers on telephone helplines has had a significant impact on helpline training and quality control, benefitting helpline organisations, call-takers, and users. The impact has been realised through a) engagement activities that have increased understanding of helpline interactions amongst managers and call-takers, b) training and development activities that have changed call-takers' practices, and c) consultation and evaluations that have changed organisational policy and practice.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Loughborough University's Helpline Research Unit (LUHRU) is part of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group which founded and developed methods for analysing social interaction. Its basic research shows how people collaboratively accomplish social actions and how psychological phenomena (emotions, identities, memories and so on) are handled in talk and social interaction **[3.1]**.

LUHRU has four principal members: Jonathan Potter (Professor and Dean of School) who arrived at Loughborough University in 1987, Sue Wilkinson (Professor) arriving in 1994, Alexa Hepburn (Reader) in 2002, and Carly Butler (Lecturer) in 2010.

They have collaborated with colleagues from Australia and Sweden in research on eleven UK and international helplines since 2000, resulting in 21 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters written while members were employed at Loughborough University. This body of work positions Loughborough University as the world centre for research into how telephone helplines deliver their services.

Research has focused on three substantive areas:

a) Research that identifies how advice is given and received on helplines
LUHRU research has shown that advice-giving is a common source of trouble between caller and call-taker but is managed differently in different helplines. We have identified when and how advice causes problems, and the ways in which call-takers manage these difficulties **[3.2, 3.3]**. For example, callers to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC) helpline sometimes resist appropriate advice. We showed that call-takers manage advice resistance through working to counter linguistic constructions **[3.3]**. In contrast, Kids Helpline avoids direct advice-giving. The research found their call-takers use questions that invite callers to come up with their own solutions to problems, empowering callers to use their own resources and agency **[3.2]**.

b) Research that identifies practices for managing emotion
Hepburn's **[3.4]** pioneering research on crying in calls to the NSPCC developed new methods for the study of emotion in helpline calls, and in social interaction more generally. Detailed transcription of crying identified call-takers' sensitivity to different types of crying, and how they shaped their responses accordingly. The research shows that emotions are not simply a cause or product of helpline interactions, but play an active part in the on-going management of the call and the relationship between caller and call-taker. These findings facilitated further research on empathy and emotional reciprocity, and have been developed through research on displays of anger and laughter.

c) Research that examines helpline policies and practices

LUHRU has carried out research on how call-takers manage helpline policies, and core helpline practices like handling the opening of a call. **[3.5]** They have found that helpline policies can cause interactional problems between callers and call-takers, and identified how call-takers manage these problems **[3.2, 3.6]**. For example, Wilkinson **[3.6]** examined the practices by which call-takers on a health-related charity collect information about caller ethnicity and identified specific problems with the organisation's ethnic monitoring process. This led to concrete recommendations to improve the accuracy of the organisation's monitoring and the call-takers' practices for collecting this information.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Papers:

3.1. Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and Cognition.* London: Sage Publications. ISBN: 978-0803976979, 1622 citations

3.2. Butler, C.W., Potter, J., Danby, S., Emmison, M. and Hepburn, A. (2010). Advice-implicative interrogatives: Building 'client centred' support in a children's helpline. *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 73(3), 265-287. DOI:10.1177/0190272510379838

IF 1.892; 15/59 in Social Psychology; 21 Citations

3.3. Hepburn, A. and Potter, J. (2011). Designing the Recipient: Managing advice resistance in institutional settings, *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 74(2), 216-241. DOI: 10.1177/0190272511408055

IF 1.892; 15/59 in Social Psychology; 12 citations

3.4. Hepburn, A. (2004). Crying: Notes on description, transcription and interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction,* 37(3), 251-290. DOI:10.1207/s15327973rlsi3703_1

IF: 1.226, 19/72 in Communication; 86 citations

3.5. Potter, J. and Hepburn, A. (2003). 'I'm a bit concerned' – Early actions and psychological constructions in a child protection helpline, *Research on Language and Social Interaction,* 36(3), 197-240. DOI: 10.1207/S15327973RLSI3603_01

IF: 1.226, 19/72 in Communication, 88 citations

3.6. Wilkinson, S. (2011). Constructing ethnicity statistics in talk-in-interaction: Producing the 'White European'. *Discourse & Society,* 22(3), 343-361. DOI: 10.1177/0957926510395446

IF: 0.672, 41/72 in Communication, 5 Citations

Grants and Awards

2005: the NSPCC Helpline research was part of a Loughborough University Social Sciences Departmental submission that won the *Queen's Anniversary Prize* for internationally outstanding work on problems faced by children and young people.

2007-09: Australian Research Council 'Discovery' Grant, *The impact of technological modality on troubles telling and advice giving on a national children's helpline,* AU $175,000, Hepburn and Potter, co-investigators, facilitated the design of different studies, analysis of data, and writing up finished research. With Susan Danby and Mike Emmison (Australia), Jakob Cromdal and Karin Osvaldsson (Sweden) and Butler.

2013 BPS Undergraduate Research Assistant Award. £1600.00 to fund a 2nd year student for a summer internship to assist with the project: *Anger, conflict and disagreements in calls to a child protection helpline.*

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

This research has significant social impact through improving the provision of telephone helpline support to vulnerable groups. There are three beneficiaries: helpline managers (whose organisations have benefitted from expert consultation), helpline operators (whose awareness, skills, and practices have improved), and callers themselves whose needs are better understood

and met. The further potential reach of the research impact is extensive – in addition to the helplines the researchers have worked with directly, the 450 or so helplines accredited by the researchers' association with Helpline Partnership, each receive training that will in future be informed by the research, and collectively they receive 29 million calls per year.

The impact of the work has been achieved through (a) engagement, (b) research-based training, and (c) consultancy and evaluation. These activities have changed awareness, improved call-takers' skills, and led to improvements in helpline policies and practices **[5.1-5.7]**.

(a) Engagement has resulted in increased awareness and understanding
By sharing the research findings (as described in section 2) with helplines the researchers have increased awareness of the interactional patterns and practices of helpline calls. Helpline managers and call-takers have greater understanding about handling strong emotions **[3.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3]**, how advice can be given in non-directive ways **[3.2, 3.3] [5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4]**, and how ethically sensitive issues can be managed **[5.4, 5.5]**.

In 2009, research on using questions in advice delivery **[3.2]** were shared with Kids Helpline staff. The presentation and discussion enhanced attendees' understanding about how the organisation's policy of non-directive advice was handled through questioning techniques **[5.8]**.

In June 2010, LUHRU's research was discussed at a *Knowledge Exchange Workshop on Telephone Helplines* at Edinburgh University. This led to the delivery of a workshop for *Parenting Across Scotland* (PAS - a partnership of organisations supporting families, including Parentline Scotland, Lone Parent Helpline, and Stepfamily Scotland) in May 2012 **[5.2]**. Participating call-takers and helpline managers reported that the workshop increased their understanding about ways of handling strong emotion **[3.4]** and advice-giving **[3.2, 3.3] [5.3, 5.4]**.

Between 2002 and 2004, Hepburn worked intensively with the Duty Manager at NSPCC to discuss the research findings, offering support and advice to individual practitioners and reporting findings to team meetings. Participants said that these activities had raised awareness of call openings and dealing with upset callers **[5.1, 5.2]**.

A bespoke workshop delivered in November 2012 raised NSPCC call-takers' awareness of how callers display emotion, and how to handle advice resistance **[5.1]**. During 2012 and 2013, individual meetings with call-takers from Compassion in Dying have resulted in increased understanding of advice giving **[3.2, 3.3]** in relation to complex medical and legal issues. A formal evaluation of the service has also increased awareness and understanding of how call-takers can best support callers **[5.4, 5.5]**

(b) Research-based training and guidance has enhanced the continuing professional development of helpline practitioners
Workshop participants listen to calls the researchers have analysed and are taught how to consider the consequences of different ways of handling various interactional issues **[5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5]**. They have reported that as well as increasing awareness of issues around emotion and advice-giving, the workshops led to changes in their techniques **[5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4]**. For instance, participants at the Parenting Across Scotland workshop said that the workshop improved their practices by 'Helping me consider my responses', 'Thinking about how to deal with calls more effectively and efficiently' and 'Considering how to conduct calls more proactively'.

The significance of LUHRU for continuing professional development has been recognised by the national accrediting body for helplines – the Helplines Partnership (formerly the Telephone Helplines Association) who have entered into partnership with LUHRU **[5.6, 5.7]**.

(c) Consultancy and expert advice has led to changes in helpline policies and practices
The effectiveness of LUHRU's research and training has led to the group being invited to offer consultancy and expert advice, and to evaluate helpline services **[5.1, 5.4]**. **Outcomes of these**

activities include improved service documents and standardisation of call-taking strategies.

In July 2012, NSPCC asked Hepburn and Potter to examine a 'failed call' which resulted in suicide. The report was used to support quality control and feed into managerial decisions about how to handle similar calls in the future **[5.1]**.

In 2012, Wilkinson was asked to evaluate Compassion in Dying's End-of-Life Rights Information Line. A report, based on analysis of 200+ calls, advised how the service could improve. Recommendations led to changes in service policy and practice, including improvements to documents used by call-takers, changes in the way call-takers discuss issues with legal implications, and improved call monitoring **[5.4] The report also provided an evidence base which the charity has drawn on in its outreach and policy-making activities [5.5]**.

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5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

The following sources of corroboration can be made available at request:

5.1. **Letter from Head of Child Protection Operations, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**: Describes on-going relationship between NSPCC and Hepburn and Potter. Confirms that the work of the LUHRU has been shared with NSPCC and used in delivering workshops, and that NSPCC contracted Hepburn and Potter to offer expert consultation on a failed call. Testifies that these activities have led to increased awareness and understanding amongst call-takers and management and improvements in call-taker skills.

5.2. **Letter from Project Manager at Parenting across Scotland:** Confirms that the work of the LUHRU has been shared with PAS and used in delivering workshops. Testifies that these activities have led to increased awareness and understanding amongst call-takers and improvements in call-taker skills.

5.3. **Feedback from workshops run for Parenting Across Scotland:** Evidence for a range of extremely positive quantitative and qualitative feedback given by workshop participants

5.4. **Letter from Director at Compassion in Dying** supporting the claim of influence on training

5.5. **Compassion-in-Dying response to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Mental Capacity Act,** July 2013

5.6. **Letter from Chief Executive Officer of Telephone Helplines Partnership:** Confirms that LUHRU's reputation has led to a formal partnership with the organisation, resulting in LUHRU involvement with on-going helpline accreditation decisions and training.

5.7. **Emails from CEO, Telephone Helplines Partnership**: Confirms meetings held with Hepburn have led to agreement to instigate a formal partnership with the organisation, resulting in LUHRU involvement with on-going helpline accreditation decisions and training.

5.8. **Australian Research Council report** documenting impact from ARC helpline grant