University of
Roehampton
London

Assessment Centres and "me"! Re-organising the "self"

Lauretta Giovannoni

Supervised by: Dr Lewis Goodings   March 2012

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ABSTRACT

Assessment Centres are regarded as an integral part of the selection process, in recruiting and promoting within organisations. This selection process is orchestrated by trained Assessors, to ensure the "right person for the job" is recruited. Successful candidates are those who can demonstrate particular competencies and experience in line with the role. This research explores the experience of participating in Assessment Centres from a different vantage point, emphasising talk as an active tool in managing and constructing the experience. Discourse Analysis was used to gain insight into how the Assessment Centre experience was managed, drawing upon a corpus of transcripts gathered from semi-structured interviews of Assessors and candidates who had just completed Assessment Centres. The research shows how Assessors use discourse to construct a "membership category" of being in "Assessor Mode", and how candidates organise themselves in talk in relation to the assessments by "ordering the past". A further consideration looks at how the assessment environment is coordinated to enable the Assessor to gain access to the "true nature" of the candidate during exercises. This brings to light what occurs in the space of Assessment Centres beyond exercises and psychometric tests, conceptualising the experience as a moment-by-moment interaction where the 'self' is continually re-organised.

KEY WORDS:	ASSESSMENT CENTRES	DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	SELF	RE-ORGANISING	PAST

Introduction

Interviews, psychometric tests, written tasks and an array of methods involved in the process of assessing candidates come to mind, when one thinks of Assessment Centres ('ACs') (Woodruffe, 2000b). Research into ACs is primarily focused on validity (Klimoski & Brickner, 1987; Howard, 1997), effectiveness (Garavan & Morley, 1997) and cost-effectiveness (Payne, Anderson & Smith, 1992). In recent years ACs have increased in popularity from a "small scale use in selection" and career development to being perceived as a tool for gaining invaluable experience and information for both the applicant and the Assessor (McKenna, 2006).

It has been suggested that the experience of an AC is seen to "empower individuals", providing opportunities to gather information and reflect upon exercises experienced. Thus the candidate gains insight into their own performance, which leads to an open dialogue between candidate and Assessors who in turn act as advisors seeking to resolve any implication that may arise from the outcome of the AC. Research along these lines typically uses written self-reports by candidates after the completion of exercises (McKenna, 2006).

Although self-reporting has many benefits, it has been suggested there are limitations such as "social desirability" (Haddock & Maio, 2008, cited in Gross, 2010). Candidates may be reluctant to give answers revealing their true feelings in questionnaires, and instead give replies they may deem expected, most appropriate or the 'proper' response (ibid). It has been proposed that "social desirability" may be due to internal attitudes (Cooper et al., 2004), where the individual attempts to position themselves as having similar norms and standards to those of their culture, environment or society (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, cited in Carver & Scheier, 2008). Fazio (1989) argued that any attitudes' main function is to adhere to an "object appraisal" (cited: Gross, 2010).

Furthermore, it is important to consider how one may attribute the experience (Robin, Mendelsohn, Connell & Kwan, 2004) particularly where self-reported feedback takes place later. It has been argued that "person-memory" occurs, where individuals have a tendency to organise features together that are congruent; for example, linking desirable with positive and separating those that are undesirable or negative. Trait memories are a further concern. These are based on inferences from behavioural and situational information, through which causal attributions of an individual's behaviour may predominate; (Schneider, Hastorf & Ellsworth, 1979, cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2008) "Self-perception theory" (Bem, 1967) is one example.

Conventionally within social psychology, the manner of presenting oneself either within a setting such as an AC or elsewhere has predominantly been evaluated as a cognitive process (Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). Silvester, Anderson-Gough, Anderson and Mohamed (2002) in their study of attribution and impression management in the workplace, allude to candidates' use of specific types of causal attributions as being more efficient at communicating positive impressions. Impression management or self-presentation is described as: "conscious or unconscious attempts to influence images during interaction" (Gilmore et al, 1999, cited in Silvester et al, 2002; Goffman, 1959). Individuals are thought to possess the ability to wield "powerful influences on interpersonal behaviour and decision-making" through the manner in

which they recount events and use description (Sitkin & Bies, 1993, cited in Silvester et al, 2002).

Psychometric testing and the ability to measure 'personality' is a fundamental element within ACs. Cattell (1996) & Eysenck (1953) view a person as "consisting of measurable personality traits, abilities and attributes" (cited in Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pg. 96) that are considered as innate or developmental. An individual's actions and behaviour can essentially be determined to be the result of the combination of traits possessed. The proposition is that individuals' responses will be outweighed by their traits regardless of the "immediate situation" or "context surrounding the person". This thinking forms the basis of personality tests and inventories that aim to measure individual differences in specific traits. However, Mischel (1968) argues that the Trait Theory approach is "highly asocial" and overlooks inconsistencies in human behaviour, with behaviour bearing minimal relation to non-test situations. This would suggest that – depending on the perceived situation – particular traits may dominate at any given time, rendering trait-driven testing unpredictable (cited in Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pg.97).

Understanding Assessment Centres from a discursive position

Consequently, no allowance for "acting out a part of 'managing' the impressions given to others…" is afforded as, within Trait Theory, the individual is fully "…synonymous with their disposition and identify completely with it" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). According to Edwards and Potter (1993) attributions and self-impressions are "managed and handled" through a discursive approach executed "indirectly or implicitly", the purpose being to "interest-manage". This may similarly be achieved by drawing upon connotations (Foucault, 1983). Positioning therefore occurs through a discursive process which involves, for example, recalling or making a 'valid' attribution that attends to the "normative constraints and opportunities" in a particular context (Harré, Moghaddam, Pilkerton Cairnie, Rothbart & Sabat, 2009).

It could therefore be argued that representations of reality are constructed at any given moment drawing from the contextual framework at hand, where accounts are not matters of reference but, rather, are meaningful situational statements (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995; Jost & Kruglanski, 2002; Antaki, 2004; Mallon, 2007).

Positioned within a social constructionist framework, Discourse Analysis turns its attention to the use of language as a tool that constructs social and psychological life (Parker 1994, pg. 245, cited in Willig, 2008). Dickerson (2000) proposes that through analysing "in-talk-interactions" one may gain awareness of positioning. Here, 'talk' is an active 'doing' rather than a "presumed cognitive causal essence behind the talk". The discourses individuals use enable insights into an individual's "ways of seeing the world" and "ways of being in the world". Discourse analysis aims to detect and bring to light the positioning people do through language (Willig, 2008). It investigates the way in which contradictory subjects may be presented in order to "blame, persuade and describe" the perceived situation. This is accomplished through inspection of spoken and written language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Madill & Barkham, 1997). The emphasis within a discursive approach is much the same as within ethnomethodology or conversation analysis (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1971;

Schegloff, 1997, cited in Dickerson 2000), which both portray the proficient way in which individuals "orientate the interaction in hand" through talk (Dickerson, 2000).

This study aims through Discourse Analysis to gain insight into the experience of ACs through viewing 'talk' as an active construction of the experience rather than a mere recount, with language considered as a matter of "analytical interest" instead of being a "simple window on the mind" (Abell & Stokoe, 2001).

Assessment Centres and notions surrounding them

Assessors and the candidate can be seen to have juxtaposed notions surrounding ACs, with a need to manage the dilemmas this may present. Therefore, the investigation reflects on how discursive acts of entitlement are produced for ACs. Potter's (1996) "Category entitlement" concept draws upon "category-specific knowledge", and in the AC setting, those involved may need to advocate the procedural practices within the ACs, to manage their precarious position.

Assessment Centres and procedural practices

Furthermore, investigating how ACs are worked up through the discourses available in cultural norms into "category entitlements" (Potter, 1996), which warrant and account for operational functions. A "membership category" (Sacks, 1972; Potter; 1996; Schegloff, 2007a; Stokoe, 2006) of 'Assessor' emerges, with its own "category-bound activities" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) that assist the Assessors in evaluating candidates in relation to the organisational norms. The devices of language, talk and attributions that support this 'Assessor' ,membership category' will be explored (Edward & Potter, 1992; Antaki, 2004). With a focus on how the Assessors' are embodied in the process by assuming a "neutral demure". This enactment of their "membership category" resonates with Stokoe's (2004) "categories and activities" that go together as a normative practice (cited in Stokoe, 2010). The dilemmas this may present are considered, as this position of neutrality is not automatic.

Within the "membership category" of Assessor, a "process expert" role is assumed by Organisational Psychologists, to whom a position of power is accorded in line with Foucault's (1980) "power-knowledge". They adopt the role of safeguarding practices, and their "power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen" (Foucault, 1980: 154). A position of ensuring Assessors are held accountable becomes eligible by mobilising the concept of "the conduct of conduct: a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991: 2). According to Foucault's (1981: 94) notions, power is relational, with relations being exercised through institutional practices, techniques, and procedures.

Assessment Centres and memory

ACs are typically viewed as a singular site of activity but they should arguably be considered in terms of classic issues of human, social interaction such as memory, by exploring how candidates organise themselves in relation to the past. Contemporary models of memory see memory as stable and continuous in relation

to identity and 'self-hood' (Schactcer, 1996; Danziger, 2002; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2001). This research considers "social remembering" (Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Middleton & Brown, 2005) – which is seen as having "relational, practical and collective qualities" (Reavey & Brown, 2007) – and looks at examples where candidates draw on memories from the past in order to portray current competencies and therefore potential future abilities. Social remembering presents the past as something that is "actively shaped as it becomes organised and narrated in the present" (Haaken, 2003) and includes "uses of remembering in specific contexts and moments" (ibid), with these narratives being subject to certain "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007).

Assessment Centres and the Therapeutic setting

Lastly, this research considers the interpersonal relational quality created within the space of the AC exercises and draws a parallel to, and distinction from, contemporary psychotherapeutic relationships (Rogers, 1975; Dryden, 2007).

ACs draw on the similar processes to those used within the psychotherapeutic practices. This is accomplished through Assessors' borrowing of "discursive practices" that underpin models of psychotherapy (Clegg, 1989), granting them entitlement to certain procedures and the position of 'expert' in Foucault's (1981; 94) 'power-knowledge' construct. From this position, the Assessor looks to uncover the "real nature" of the candidate. This process is combined with the use of the NEO 5 personality inventory as a fundamental tool (Cattell, 1996; Eysenck,1953). Moreover, the personality inventory acts to account for any misalignment in results. As traditional psychology views the individual as a "self-evident unit", the argument goes that, through the correct procedures, the "essential human subject" can be discovered and revealed (Townsley, 1993).

However, depending on the perceived situation, particular traits may dominate at any given time, rendering trait-driven tests unpredictable because they may overlook the inconsistencies in human behaviour (Mischel 1968, cited in Potter & Wetherell, 1987 pg.97). In this study, the 'self' is viewed from a Post-Structuralist framework that is not fixed (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984). This viewpoint is still a relatively new concept within Psychology (Rose, 1990), and Occupational Psychology (Henriques et al., 1984; Hollway, 1991). To date, little research has been conducted into management from this epistemology (Calas & Smircich, 1990; Roberts, 1984, 1991), and therefore; it may be contended that seeking an understanding of the 'self' through a discursive approach is a new way of observing the phenomenon of ACs. A unique view is taken by exploring what takes place in the space beyond competency exercises, cognitive testing and psychometric tests. This research intends to unpack the practices of ACs from a Post-Structuralism viewpoint.

Method

Design

This report presents a qualitative study that seeks to understand the experience of participating in ACs.

19 Participants consisting of 5 Assessors and 14 Candidates were recruited through an independent Business Psychology company. The aim was to explore the individual experiences of being involved in ACs through the use of a recorded semi-structured interview.

Extracts presented are representational of the data cohort as a whole. A number of extracts will be presented in order to demonstrate the relevant themes. Within each theme, extracts may be taken from one or more participants, as indicated next to each extract by highlighting the extract number, type of participant and participant number from the original transcripts, for example: "Extract 1: Candidate – Participant 2". In all extracts I: indicates the interviewer and P: the participant.

A Discourse Analysis methodology was used to conduct analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed (please a sample of the transcripts in Appendices 9-13) using transcription symbols (Wetherell, Tayor & Yates, 2001) (see Table 1) and a detailed inspection and analysis of the transcripts was then conducted (please see Appendices 14 for a rough example of the process of analysis) using the Discourse Analysis components: variability, function and construction (Willig, 2008). Madill & Barham (1997) suggest that in analysing data, one is required to see how the information was constructed and formed, which involves considering "inconsistencies in description, the assumptions underlying an account", such as reasoning, implications and the connotations indicated. This enables one to explore the implicit and explicit constructions of the discursive object (Willig, 2008) through inspection of spoken and written language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Madill & Barkham, 1997). In this approach, language is regarded as being of "analytical interest" instead of representing a "simple window on the mind" (Abell & Stokoe, 2001).

Table 1: Transcription Symbols (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001; p62)

Transcription Symbols	
(.)	A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk
<u>Under</u>	Underlined fragments indicates speaker's emphasis
[ ]	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicates the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk

Ethical considerations

A consent request (Appendix 1) was forwarded to Robertson Cooper Ltd with whom I currently hold a voluntary work experience position, requesting permission to interview candidates and Assessors involved in ACs the company runs. Consent to conduct the proposed research was granted (Appendix 2). I gained consent and ethical approval from my supervisor (Appendix 3 and 4) to commence the research.

Consent forms and debrief forms (Appendices 5 and 6) explaining the purpose and procedures of the study, including relevant contact information, were given to each

participant. All names have been removed from transcripts to ensure anonymity of participants. Participants were assigned their own unique 4-digit code on each form, offering anonymity and enabling the participant to withdraw their data from the study should they so wish.

The interviews were held in a private interview room at the venue in Central London where the ACs were held. All consent forms and transcripts/recordings have been filed away separately in secure, locked cabinets for 2 years, to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted with 19 participants who consisted of: 3 Internal Assessors, 2 Organisational Psychologist Assessors and 14 Candidates. All of them were voluntarily recruited and the ethical procedures above were followed. 15-30 minute interviews were conducted and recorded after each participant had completed their full AC day. During the interviews participants were asked to describe their experiences, through the use of semi-structured interview questions taken from a question bank (Appendix 7 and 8), and follow-on open questions.

The equipment required for the study was: 2 x tape recorders, a personal laptop, and the semi-structured interview question bank.

Results

Theme 1 – Assessment Centres: a "Necessary Evil"

This theme concerns how candidates and Assessors actively manage a juxtaposed position surrounding their notions of ACs.

Extract 1: Candidate – participant 2

31**I:**   view on assessment centres?
32**P:**   Uummm I think that they are necessary evil if you like um they (.) I do think that they (.) they
33   weed people out um because there is a lot of preparation involved and I think that things like
34   the competency-based questions um really can (.) uh help to (.) take away an element of (.)
35   acting that goes on in a normal face-to-face interview (.) everyone puts their interview face on
36   they they they try to be something that they're not in a lot of cases um using the examples of
37   the competency-based questions can really demonstrate um (.) you know the time and effort

Extract 2: Candidate – participant 2

40   and I think that is obviously coupled alongside um things like psychometric testing um (.) the

41   role play is quite a daunting prospect for someone who's uumm (.) not had a lot of experience
42   in face to face contact with a client ah but it's what the job entails and so you know it's a it's a
43   necessary part of the testing uh I I think that they the assessment centre does the job (.) ah ah
44   of getting the best candidates for the role

In these Extracts 1-2 the candidate is actively managing a juxtaposed position surrounding their notions of ACs as a 'Necessary Evil' (extract 1, line 32). At the same time, the candidate recounts that ACs must ensure that the right applicant for the role is identified, thereby assigning a level of entitlement to ACs consistent with Potter's (1996) "category entitlement" concept. While advocating the procedural practices within the assessments, there is also clear resistance of undergoing the process of ACs: "I think that they are necessary evil" (Extract 1, line 32). The use of the word 'necessary' can be viewed as a tool for moderating the resistance.

The candidate gradually works up to definition of a "category-specific knowledge" (Potter, 1996), namely a process for determining the right applicant for the role: "I do think that they (.) they weed people out" (Extract 1, lines 32-33). This category is further qualified by positioning the processes within the AC as, firstly, well formulated "…because there is a lot of preparation involved" (extract 1; line 33) and, secondly, as being able to eliminate potential pretences: "competency-based questions um really can (.) uh help to (.) take away an element of (.) acting" (Extract 1, lines 34-35). This enables the candidate to warrant the practices of ACs, and to weight them ahead of other interview techniques, which are positioned as inferior: "…acting that goes on in a normal face-to-face interview" (Extract 1, line 35). The advantage of ACs is reiterated: "…using the examples of the competency-based questions can really demonstrate" (Extract 1, lines 36-37). This argument is further built up, by representing that there are particular behaviours that individuals display in face-to-face interviews that they do not display in ACs: "normal face to face interview (.) everyone puts their interview face on they they they try to be something that they're not" (Extract 1, lines 35-36). The claim is emphasised through the use of the "extreme case formation" (Pomerantz, 1987) seen in Extract 1, line 35 – where the word 'everyone' acts to support the speaker's account. Moreover, the speaker attempts to set themself apart from 'everyone' else who engages in this alleged behaviour; in Extract 1, line 36, the "pronoun use" (Goffman, 1979) of "they they they" positions the speaker separately from 'everyone'.

It could be argued that the candidate is bidding to locate themself in accordance with the "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007) of a "good candidate", and affords a privileged status to ACs in order to handle the dilemma of resistance. The resistance reappears: "obviously coupled alongside um things like psychometric testing um (.) the role play is quite daunting prospect for someone" (Extract 2, lines 40-41). The dilemma is once again managed, by arguing "it's a necessary part of testing" (Extract 2, lines 42-43), and by simultaneously re-establishing the "expert knowledge" qualifier for ACs and the speaker's "good candidate" role through the phrase: "I think that they the assessment centre does the job (.) ah ah of getting the best candidate for the role" (Extract 2, lines 43-44). The candidate is thus able to

comply with the tasks they are required to participate in during the assessment process, despite their resistance.

Extract 3: Organisational Psychologist Assessor - participant 19

37**P:** we're we're there as <u>as</u> (.) the <u>psychologist</u> (.) as the process <u>experts</u> (.) and I
38   do I'm <u>very</u> aware of that <u>role</u> (.) so I <u>do</u> feel we have <u>got to</u> play that role <u>well</u> (.) and that
39   means (.) <u>not</u> just making sure the process works (.) it <u>means</u> holding (.) the <u>other</u> Assessors
40   accountable (.) in a sense ah (.) and insuring (.) that <u>particularly</u> (.) if you're internal it's <u>very</u> easy
41   (.) to (.) rely on all that <u>experience</u> (.) that you have (.) of the (.) organisation (.) and <u>obviously</u>
42   (.)at the assessment centre you <u>are</u> (.) part of the <u>whole</u> rationale (.) that they're objective (.)
43   and that they <u>write</u> what they <u>see</u> (.)and <u>hear</u> (.) on the <u>day</u> (.)and <u>that</u>(.) <u>that's</u> part of our role
44   (.) and I'm <u>very</u> (.) aware of <u>that</u> (.) in terms of the role the psychologist play (.) so I guess that's

In Extract 3 a further working-up of the ACs as a "Category of Entitlement" is seen through the role the Organisational Psychologists play in validating the procedures within ACs: "…we're we're there as <u>as</u> (.) the <u>psychologist</u> (.) as the process <u>experts</u>" (line 37). This serves to bolster the procedures within the ACs due to the involvement of "process <u>experts</u>". There is also an act of distinguishing the Organisational Psychologist Assessors from the Internal Assessors, organising a "sub-membership category" which acts to oversee the Assessors. This is achieved through the "pronoun use" (Goffman, 1979): "we're we're" (line 37). This is further stressed in lines 39-40: "<u>not</u> just making sure the process works(.) it <u>means</u> holding (.) the <u>other</u> Assessors accountable", which qualifies the practices undertaken by the "membership category" of 'Assessor'. The variation in "membership category" between internal Assessors and organisational psychologists, where the former are classed as 'other', is subtle but visible: "…the <u>other</u> Assessors accountable (.) in a sense ah (.) and insuring (.) that <u>particularly</u> (.) if you're internal" (lines 39-40).

In this manner, the organisational psychology Assessors are positioned as bound "you <u>are</u> (.) part of the <u>whole</u> rationale", (line 42) to implement the processes and to ensure that the internal Assessors remain within the AC's practices – "that they're objective" (line 42). Here the pronoun use of 'they're', acts as a discursive indicator (Goffman, 1979) to separate the roles. Internal Assessors are to be held accountable, and must adhere to the conduct and procedures of the ACs: "…they <u>write</u> what they <u>see</u> (.) and <u>hear</u> (.) on the <u>day</u> (.) and <u>that</u> (.) <u>that's</u> part of our role" (line 43).

The inference of line 37's "process <u>experts</u>" draws on Foucault's (1980) notions of 'power-knowledge' and suggests an obligation to ensure that assessment practices are adhered to: "I'm <u>very</u> (.) aware of <u>that</u> (.) in terms of the role the psychologist play" (line 44). Thus, not only do the organisational psychology Assessors have to implement the AC's procedures but they also need to adhere to the practices

involved in being an Organisational Psychologist: "that (.) that's part of our role" (line 43). This is demonstrated through the discourse function of 'footing' (Goffman, 1979) of "I'm", which is a discursive performance of duty: "I'm very aware of that role (.) so I do feel we have got to play that role well" (line 38).

Theme 2 – Stepping into "Assessor Mode" and dilemmas in re-constructing this position

This theme explores how the Assessors step into a particular mode and ways in which this is managed by Assessors and candidates.

Extract 4: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – participant 18

420 **I:** the candidates are told that the Assessors are going to have a
421   very neutral demure with them during the da[y h]ow do you find retaining that what is [the]
422   [yep] [um yeah]
423   experience of holding that?
424 **P** yeah cause (.) I try (.) when I first go into them (.) cause I do (.) uh the
425   briefing (.) and I am a bit more (.) welcoming then (.) I try to be anyway sort of say about the
426   day wwwe're trying to be friendly oh sorry we are we are (.) normally friendly but we are in
427   Assessor modes you're not going to build the rapport so actually I've (.) gone in (.) to try just
428   sort of (.) ah be myself first off and do a do a bit more of a warm welcome but then when you
429   go into the assessment rooms yeah it will be (.) um (.) more in Assessor mode (.) and I (.) find
430   that (.) fine (.) to be honest (.) because I've (.) set the scene for that

Extract 5: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – participant 18

434 **P:**   the (.) interview it would be (.) sometimes more easy to just want to have a
435   chat to actually build some rapport and you do do that (.) to an extent (.) just the standard
436   things offering them a drink before (.) and you just sort of (.) have a (.) chat to them (.) but then
437   (.) you do read out a proforma (.) before the interviews (.) and at that stage (.) I think (.) you
438   know my mood does (.) change and my persona (.) does change and then you are going for a
439   bit more of a process you're asking for 3 examples (.) and you're just then having um (.) and you
440   explain um (.) if I'm (.) looking down or writing notes (.) it's not cause I don't want to listen and
441   interact with you (.) its cause I am trying to get down (.) what you're saying here um and so I

442   find that <u>fine</u> because it's <u>just </u>been set up (.) and <u>that </u>the candidate's <u>expecting </u>it as well

In Extracts 4-5**,** it can be seen that stepping into 'Assessor Mode' may require an active formation and in doing so create a dilemma due to fact the stance of neutrality is not automatic: "sorry we <u>are</u> we <u>are</u> (.) <u>normally </u>friendly but we <u>are</u> in Assessor <u>modes</u>" (Extract 4, lines 426-427). Here a 'disclaimer' (Potter & Wetherell 1987, 1992) is used in an attempt to avoid the Assessor being viewed as unfriendly, with a "discourse marker" (Schiffrin, 1987) of 'but' inserted in order to set up an explanation for the manner in which the Assessor will be behaving. There is also 'co-construction' (Goffman, 1979) and 'working-up' (Potter, 1996) of the Assessor Mode, by the use of 'we' as a way of permitting the stance of neutrality. This may not be an easy position to take: "more <u>easy</u> to just <u>want</u> to have a <u>chat </u>to actually build some <u>rapport</u>" (Extract 5, lines 434-435); yet the Assessor manages this dilemma by initially engaging and interacting more with the candidates: "you do do <u>that</u> (.) to an <u>extent</u> (.) just the standard things offering them a drink <u>before</u> (.) and you <u>just </u>sort of (.) have a (.) chat to them" (Extract 5, lines 435-436). There is also an element of organising the environment in order for the Assessor to then re-construct their position within the "membership category" and locate themself in "Assessor Mode": "but <u>then</u> (.) you do read out a proforma (.) before the <u>interviews</u>' (Extract 5, lines 436-437). This is achieved discursively through "working up" a "category entitlement" (Potter, 1996), by drawing on technical material – the 'proforma' – which is read out to the candidate before the interaction commences. Here the Assessor shifts into "Assessor Mode" which is discursively demonstrated with the use of a "script formation" (Edwards, 1997), namely: "but <u>then</u>" (Extract 5, line 436). A repositioning then occurs into a state of neutrality: "I <u>think </u>(.) you know my mood <u>does</u> (.) <u>change</u> and my persona (.) <u>does change</u>" (Extract 5, line 437-438). This mode of 'being' is actively embodied and carried out as a 'process': "…<u>then</u> you are going for a bit <u>more</u> of a <u>process</u> you're <u>asking</u> for 3 examples" (Extract 5, lines 438-439). The embodiment of this process is managed by restating the fact that the setting has been established earlier: "I find that <u>fine</u> because it's <u>just </u>been set up (.) and <u>that </u>the candidate's <u>expecting </u>it as well' (Extract 5, lines 441-442) and there are specific steps the Assessor is required to follow: "you're <u>asking</u> for 3 examples' (Extract 5, line 439). Therefore the AC's processes support the retention of this "Assessor Mode".

Extract 6: Candidate – participant 2

87**P:** one of the factor I <u>don't like</u> is (.) the <u>poker face</u> uh
88   uh I find that <u>really really </u>off putting I I don't understand <u>why</u> people think that is they interview
89   you you have to sit there and be <u>stoney faced</u> because why you doing that you're either
90   interested in what I'm saying or you're <u>not</u> so <u>engage me</u> (.) <u>look</u> like you <u>might actually </u>be
91   <u>interested</u> in what I have to say or screw your face up into a question do do <u>something </u>but don't
92   just sit there <u>blank faced</u> it's <u>very </u>off putting

Following on, in Extract 6 the candidate's viewpoint is considered, exploring the influence the Assessor's position of neutrality has on the candidate. Here, we can observe the dilemma the candidate faces: 'one of the factor I <u>don't like</u> is (.) the <u>poker face"</u> (line 87) and the struggle to manage this position. This dilemma is further emphasised through the use of "affect displays" (Buttny, 1993) performed by volume and stress on "<u>don't like</u>" and "<u>poker face</u>" (line 87), which clearly mark the predicament. This can once again be observed in lines 88-89: "I don't understand <u>why</u> people think that is they interview you you have to sit there and be <u>stoney faced</u>". By presenting the Assessors as "stoney faced" (line 89), the candidate draws on a discursive practice of 'scene-setting' (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001), in order to attribute the struggle they face in presenting themselves as they wish in the exercise. In this example, the candidate's accountability (Edward & Potter, 1992: 53) is also being attended to, through the use of: "<u>why</u> people think that is they interview you you have to sit there and be <u>stoney faced</u>" (lines 88-89); the proposal being that the manner in which the interview is being conducted has an impact on the candidate's performance.

Furthermore, the candidate attempts to manage their position of "good candidate" through the use of "<u>why</u> people" (line 88) instead of directly referring to the Assessors. This acts to maintain an affiliation to the "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007) of a "good candidate", and again an act to manage their resistance to ACs may be observed. An example of "attributional business" (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001) taking place can be seen in lines 89-90: "that you're either interested in what I'm saying or you're <u>not</u> so <u>engage me</u> (.)". This suggests that the candidate is unable to involve the Assessor in a manner that would best promote who they are, through the engagement idea seen in line 90: "so <u>engage me</u>". Attributing the dilemma faced to a lack of interest on the Assessor's part: "<u>look</u> like you <u>might actually</u> be <u>interested</u> in what I have to say" (lines 90-91), is a good example of "affect displays" (Buttny, 1993) and this is performed through volume changes and stress on '<u>look</u>', "<u>might actually</u>", and '<u>interested</u>'. In this "attributional business" (ibid) the candidate attributes the effect of getting flustered ("it's <u>very</u> off putting", line 92), to the lack of interaction from the Assessors: "<u>look</u> like you <u>might actually</u> be <u>interested</u>" (line 90-91). Yet again the struggle to manage this relational position is observed: "do do <u>something</u> but don't just sit there <u>blank faced</u>" (line 91-92).

A noticeable relational implication can be observed as a result of the "neutral demure". Here, a parallel between the classic Freudian psychoanalyst's and the Assessor's "Neutral Stance" can be drawn: "you have to sit there and be <u>stoney faced</u>' (line 89), "don't just sit there <u>blank faced</u>" (line 92). The classic Freudian analyst assumes a blank screen position in order to remove themselves from the process, with the intention that the patient will project onto the analyst in order for this projection to be interpreted (Dryden, 2007). However, it has since been understood that this blank screen approach is, instead, interpreted as rude, cold or patronising and does not assist the patient or therapist in their interactions (Yalom, 1980). A similar phenomenon can be observed in this current study: "I <u>don't like</u> is (.) the <u>poker face</u> uh uh I find that <u>really really</u> off putting I I don't understand <u>why</u> people think that is they interview you you have to sit there and be <u>stoney faced</u>" (lines 87-89). This suggests that the candidate projects significance onto the Assessor's "Neutral stance" and, as a result, a number of assumptions are made and then reacted to accordingly, as seen in lines 90-91: "<u>look</u> like you <u>might actually</u> be

interested in what I have to say". This implies the candidate has made an assumption from the Assessor's neutrality, that the Assessor is not interested in what the candidate has to say. As a consequence, this may impact the way in which the candidate 're-orders' the past in the current context: "sit there blank faced it's very off putting" (line 92).

Theme 3 - How Candidates order past selves to display competencies and dilemmas in doing so

This theme concerns the way that candidates order their past 'self', through remembering past experiences to demonstrate the competences required for the role, which need to be in line with the Assessors' and the AC's norms.

Extract 7: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 18

14   **P:**   communicating is part of what they are being measured on but they're
15   are really showing that they (.) can ah (.) they have identified for themselves (.) that these are
16   the competencies that are needed for that role (.) if they do understand those and they have
17   had an in-depth there (.) then they can apply those situations (.) thinking on their feet
18   sometimes (.) in terms it's not just rehearsed it's not just (.) this is a set of things that I think I (.)
19   ought to do (.) but they can actually very much sort of demonstrate that those are the
20   behaviours these are the competencies for the role (.) they've got that understanding and they
21   can apply that to the different situations the different scenarios that they might find themselves

Extract 8: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 18

158 P a good candidate is showing (.) that they've got the
159   drive the determination the desire to want to do that (.) plus they are backing that up (.) with
160   concrete examples (.) of (.) how I've applied (.) my learning my development sort of their
161   learning their development (.) through that (.) their work context

Extract 9: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 18

153 P what they can(.) show from their past experience what
154   they can show (.) and how they work right now (.)

Extract 10: Internal Assessor – Participant 15

16 P people who (.) have struggled with an assessment centre before who are so over prepared that (.)
17   become inflexible (.) and then stop being fluid enough

Extract 11: Internal Assessor – Participant 15

197 **P** good examples that suit that (.) and then you get
198　asked another question that the answer you've just give was actually better suited to (.) that
199　one (.) and you have to think of something else now and then quite often they try to crowbar
200　[(.)] a set example into that [(.)] which why over preparation (.) can be a problem so that can be
201　[okay]　　　　　　　[ya]
202　one of the disadvantages

Extract 12: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 19

238 **P** very narrow range of experience (.) very very narrow (.) and (.) I just didn't feel he was
239　　anywhere near ready for this for this role uh (.) this level (.) and you know he (.) he got anxious
240　　and he ah (.) started to find difficult to(.) to answer questions (.) and you know you felt for him

The ability to retrieve 'literal' or 'accurate' recounts of the past is seen to be essential in verifying recollections of past experiences (Schacter, 1996; Danziger, 2002). However, Bartlett (1932) views recall as a "mixture and description" tailored to the current demands of the present. As such, "evaluation and challenge" is therefore seen as a "social act" where the past is evoked with the aim of serving some need or objective. This issue will be considered in the context of Extracts 7-12.

The predominate element of the ACs are competency based exercises, of which candidates have some prior knowledge. In preparation for attending the AC, the candidate reflects on previous experience of equivalent competencies and skills to draw upon during the process of the day, to convey that they are suitable applicants. In order to demonstrate this effectively the candidate needs to position his/her past selves in line with the "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007) within the given organisation in order to locate their experience efficiently. This is achieved through organising and re-structuring the past into the present (Haaken, 2003) to fit the norms of the AC and the relevant organisation. However in doing so the individual may encounter a dilemma through re-ordering and over-working the past to the point where they end up being 'over-prepared' – the past becomes so contrived for the Assessors that it is no longer fluid and the Assessors have a sense that the candidate is trying to "crowbar [(.)] a set example" (Extract 11, lines 199-200) into the answer being given.

This "ordering of past self" may be viewed as "social remembering" (Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Middleton & Brown, 2005) which is seen as having "relational, practical and collective qualities" (Reavey & Brown, 2007).

In Extract 7, lines 14-16, "but they're are really showing that they (.) can ah (.) they have identified for themselves (.) that these are the competencies that are needed for that role", there is a clear statement that the candidate needs to organise their

'past-self' in order to effectively demonstrate qualities Assessors are looking for. It can further be explored how the candidate needs to ensure that they are in line with the "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007) regarding the particular role: "the competencies that are needed for that role" (Extract 7, line 16). The speaker proposes that a successful candidate is one who is able to align the 'past-self' "they have identified for themselves" (Extract 7, line 15) with the context of the setting, by "really <u>showing</u> that they" (Extract 7, line 15) have considered the norms "needed for that role" (Extract 7, line 16). Thus an active presentation of the past, which considers the current context and moment in time, needs to take place. The candidate's identity can be seen to be built around versions of agency (ibid): "they've <u>got</u> the <u>drive</u> the <u>determination</u> the <u>desire</u>" (Extract 8, line 158-159). This is further worked-up though a 'transformative' approach to remembering (Haaken, 2003), as demonstrated by "their learning <u>their</u> development" (Extract 8, line 160-161) which is authenticated through checking that "they are <u>backing</u> that <u>up</u> (.) with concrete examples" (Extract 8, lines 159-160). Here it can be seen that the past experience's "concrete examples" are actively being organised in the present, in order to align them within the current context. By achieving this alignment in organising the past, to "<u>demonstrate</u> that <u>those</u> are the behaviours" (Extract 7, lines 19-20), that fit to the norms of the role – "these are the competencies for the role" (Extract 7, line 20) – the candidates are perceived as proficient in displaying the desired competencies: "they've <u>got that</u> understanding" (Extract 7, line 20).

Through "landscape/event schemata" (Haaken, 1999; Reavey & Brown, 2006b), the candidate is also required to present current experiences mapped against past experience in order to legitimise their given examples: "they can (.) <u>show</u> from their <u>past</u> experience what they can <u>show</u> (.) and how they work right now" (Extract 9, lines 153-154). However, a misalignment occurs when this does not take place, and the candidate is unable to give examples in line with the current context: "people who (.) have <u>struggled</u> with an assessment centre…' (Extract 10, line 16), possibly as a result of over-working the past "…are so over prepared" (Extract 10, line 16) that their presentation of the 'past-self' becomes contrived and "become inflexible (.) and then stop being fluid enough" (Extract 10, line 17), resulting in a loss of authenticity.

This misalignment may also result where the candidate's understanding of a given role's 'norms' is arbitrary: "you have to think of something else <u>now</u> and then quite <u>often</u> they try to crowbar [(.)] a <u>set</u> example into that" (Extract 11, lines 199-200). This may be due to an over-working: "which <u>why</u> over preparation (.) <u>can</u> be a problem" (Extract 11, line 200). The result is that the 'past-self' examples fail to be legitimised as authentic: "so <u>that</u> can be one of the disadvantages" (Extract 11, lines 200-202). Through discursively achieving alignment with the 'norms' and 'context' of the role when presenting the 'past-self', the candidate is seen as successful in displaying the relevant competency. Yet an inability to do so can be either seen as the past's having been over-worked, or a lack of understanding for the role. A misalignment in presenting the 'past-self' may also be perceived as a lack of experience: "very very <u>narrow</u> (.) and (.) I <u>just</u> didn't feel he was <u>anywhere</u> near ready for this for this <u>role</u>" (Extract 12, lines 238-239). This may not only be due to the narrative used by the candidate to express himself, but also the way in which it is delivered: "you know he (.) he got anxious and he ah (.) started to find <u>difficult</u> to (.) to answer questions", which may result in dismissal of the "past-self" as legitimate.

Extract 13: Candidates – participant 5

22 **P** <u>don't</u> know what the questions
23   are going to be (.) but you <u>know</u> that you've got (.) certain (.) and (.) you don't what the (.)
24   <u>competencies</u> they're looking (.) for (.)so you're<u> trying (.)</u> to put together (.) examples of things
25   (.) you have done

Extract 14: Candidates – participant 5

39 **P** a number of examples (.) that I
40   could use for (.) different (.) situations (.) so (.) that was (.) what took up the <u>bulk</u> (.)ah of (.) my
41   time really um and it's just reminding myself (.) uh about (.) the coaching models that I use (.)
42   um and <u>actually</u> how I put those into practice (.) in my current job (.) um so it's (.) just trying to
43   think (.) through those

Extract 15: Candidates – participant 5

196 **P** you could <u>really</u> get
197   into some detail (.) um around your examples (.) um and to to get a picture across

Extract 16: Candidates – participant 5

202 **P** <u>don't over</u> (.) try and (.) try and over prepare (.) um if
203   you trying to over prepare and try a guess every situations through role plays and things like
204   that (.) you your natural piece won't come out (.) um but I would (.) um for my (.) I would (.) the
205   advice I would give <u>is</u> um (.) research the company (.) and understand so you understand their
206   <u>culture</u> and their <u>ethos</u> (.) um ah and that that will help (.) and make sure that you've got a (.)
207   <u>good</u> bank of (.) um (.) examples that you can really <u>talk </u>about

Extract 17: Candidates – participant 5

60 **P**   think <u>two</u> of my examples (.) where really detailed and structured (.) I think my <u>third</u> example (.)
61   was a bit weak (.) um (.) I didn't have the detail (.) I didn't actually <u>convey </u>the detail (.) that <u>was</u>
62   probably there (.) and coming out (.) with thinking <u>back</u> (.) thinking aah (.) I didn't say <u>this</u> (.)
63   and I didn't say <u>that</u> (.) <u>that</u> would have articulated (.) the response a lot <u>better</u> than (.) than I <u>did</u>

Extract 18: Candidates – participant 5

97 **P** I(.) I'm not sure (.) I <u>think</u> (.) I've answered what they <u>wanted</u> me to answer (.)
98   but there was there was nothing really (.) coming <u>back </u>(.) which I <u>expected</u> (.) cause they are
99   busy writing (.) and challenging (.) and things like that (.) so I'm not (.) I'm not <u>quite</u> (.) sure(.) if
100   <u>that</u> (.) hit the mark (.) <u>fully</u>

Haaken (1999) and Reavey & Brown (2006b) have proposed that memory and identity are closely entwined and that through "landmarks/event schemata" individuals are able to orientate towards a "plausible narrative", "<u>don't </u>know what the questions are going to be….you don't what the competencies they're looking (.) for (.) so you are trying to put together (.) examples of things (.) you have done (Extract 13, lines 22-25.)Thus, a current requirement e.g. such as a competency in Coaching ability, can be mapped against the events in past: "just reminding myself (.) uh about (.) the coaching models that I use" (Extract 14, line 41). A discursive strategy has been used here to legitimise the given competency through the word 'use' (extract 14; line 41) in the present tense, as this positions the speaker as not only recalling their competency from the past, but displaying this as a current ability: "<u>actually</u> how I put those into practice (.) in my current job' (Extract 14, line 42). This demonstrates an alignment taking place between the Assessors' and the candidate's notions of the role, in accordance with the "culturally available notions" (Reavey & Brown, 2007). It is seen in Extract 9, lines 153-154: "they can(.) <u>show </u>from their <u>past</u> experience what they can <u>show</u> (.) and how they work right now".

The candidate offers an insight into how the 'past-self' is 'worked-up' – actively shaped and narrated (Haaken, 2003) – in the present, through the use of detail, "you could <u>really</u> get into some detail (.) um around your examples' (Extract 15, line 196-197), surrounding the 'past-self', "um to to get a picture across" (Extract 15, line 197). In preparation for attending the AC, the participant recalled past experiences: "make sure that you've got a (.) <u>good</u> bank of (.) um (.) examples that you can really <u>talk </u>about" (Extract 16, lines 206-207) in line with their understanding of the 'norms' of the role: "research the company", "understand their <u>culture </u>and their <u>ethos</u>" (Extract 16, lines 205-206). The emphasis is on not over-working the 'past-self': "<u>don't over</u> (.) try and (.) try and over prepare" in order to re-construct these past recollections in context on the day. This is because not being able to recollect the past in context on the day is effectively experienced as a misalignment: "if you trying to over prepare … your natural piece won't come out" (Extract 16, lines 202-204). A failure in alignment occurs, e.g. "I think my <u>third</u> example (.) was a bit weak" (Extract 17, lines 60-61), when the candidate is unable to discursively match the norms of the role the Assessors hold, and does not convey the 'past-self' effectively: "thinking aah (.) I didn't say <u>this</u> (.) and I didn't say <u>that</u> (.) <u>that </u>would have articulated (.) the response a lot <u>better</u> than (.) than I did" (Extract 17, lines 62-63). Alignment needs to occur in the present 'landscape/event schemata' (Haaken, 1999; Reavey & Brown, 2006b), otherwise the presented 'past-self' becomes erroneous: "I didn't actually <u>convey</u> the detail (.) that<u>was</u> probably there" (Extract 17, lines 61-62). In ordering the 'past-self', the relation element (Reavey & Brown, 2007) between Assessor and candidate can also be observed when the candidate attributes, through the use of a "discourse marker" (Schiffrin, 1987) 'but' in Extract 18, line 98, "but there was there

was", the inability and uncertainty of being able to present the 'past-self' as legitimate, "I'm not sure (.) I <u>think</u> (.) I've answered what they <u>wanted </u>me to answer" (Extract 18, line 97), as being due to the relational nature of the interaction: "but there was there was nothing really (.) coming <u>back</u>'. It can also be noted that an "extreme case formulation" (Edwards, 1997) which acts to strengthen the account has been used – the "was nothing" positions the speaker as having a lack of agency, which acts to support their attribution claim for the misalignment in the ordering of their 'past-self'. The dilemma of the Assessor's neutral stance can be noted once again: "nothing really (.) coming <u>back</u>". The candidate actively manages this: "which I <u>expected</u> (.) cause they are busy writing" (Extract 18, line 98-99), as seen in Extract 6. Thus, the candidate is able to locate themself as a "good candidate", as seen in Extract 1.

Theme 4 – "Drilling Down into the Subconscious": Creating a space similar to a therapeutic relationship

In this theme, an investigation into the relational space created within ACs and particularly the competency exercises will be carried out, and consideration is also given to the role psychometric testing plays in this process.

Extract 19: Internal Assessor – participant 15

66 **P** [(.)] so I was interviewing
67 **I** [mmh]
68 **P** people (.) and having to assess them (.) and I could see the deficiencies in that (.) I wanted to
69   drill <u>down</u> into areas our process did not <u>allow</u> (.) so I actually uh (.) got in contact with
70   (Organisational Psychologist's name) at that stage and said look I want to bring <u>this</u> (.) part of
71   the business into the assessment centre process [(.)] ah <u>so</u> I think what I <u>like</u> about it (.) is<u> that</u>
72 **I**   [mmh]
73 **P** what I enjoy about these assessment centres (.) is that (.) <u>greater</u> depth that you get about
74   somebody [(.)] you (.) you <u>uncover</u> things that don't come out
75 **I**   [mmmh]
76 **P** from a single biographical interview(.) so <u>that's</u> one of the greatest drill bits not the words word

Extract 20: Internal Assessor – participant 15

146 **P** I describe it (.) it's a little bit like (.) ah have you heard of thin slicing(.) where you're using your
147   subconscious [(.)] almost it's <u>kind of</u> on the edge of your
148   [yes yes]
149   subconscious and your conscious (.) you you something (.) you <u>just get</u> a feeling [(.)] after
150
[okay]

151   <u>doing</u> it for a number of <u>times</u> (.) it's gone from a <u>feeling</u> (.) to you <u>are</u> recognising the <u>things</u>
152   they're (.) ah they're <u>not saying</u> (.)

Extract 21: Internal Assessor – participant 15

131 **P** you get a <u>sense</u> (.) when you <u>push</u> someone to give a bit more detail and it <u>does not</u> come (.)
132   so you don't let them drift off into another area (.) you <u>wind</u> them <u>back</u> and you <u>say</u> ah (.) just
133   take me back in <u>there</u> [(.)] and then (.) talk me <u>through</u> and ask them some (.) <u>sometimes</u> (.)
134   [Okay]
135   a little <u>unexpected</u> (.) you know (.) <u>what time</u> of day was this (.) was it in the morning or the
136   afternoon (.) was this in <u>your</u> office (.) where did you <u>meet</u> (.) and <u>throw in</u> things (.) about
137   (.) things <u>that</u> they (.) <u>should</u> be able (.) to answer really quickly (.) and <u>just</u> see if it's consistent (.)

Extract 22: Internal Assessor – participant 15

33 **P** sort of (.) have my interest piqued in some of the questions and I drill
34   down a bit further and then (.) I can't wait to see the person's psychs to see is how it matches up

In Extracts 19-22 a relational space created within ACs and particularly in the competency exercises can be seen. Here the interactions in the exercises can be seen as having similar relational qualities to those in a number of contemporary psychotherapeutic relationships. An interpersonal interaction between Assessor and candidate is formed with the Assessor getting "a <u>sense</u>" (Extract 21, line 131) and then 'feeling' (Extract 20, line 149) their way into the candidate's subjective position, thereby "entering into the perceptual world of the other" (Rogers, 1975, cited in Dryden 2007, pg.160).

Psychotherapists "embody a kind of therapeutic expertise" which enables the therapist to deal with the therapeutic practice, and this is acquired through "training and/or experience" (Cushman, 1990). Psychotherapy is fundamentally psychological in form, with the process normally involving self-disclosure, self-expression and self-description. It has a reflective quality, and mainly comprises the individual's "narrative of past and present life-experiences" (Hook, 2003).

The relational space within the AC draws on the same processes as those used within the psychotherapeutic relationship. This is achieved through Assessors borrowing the "discursive practices" that underpin models of psychotherapy (Clegg, 1989), granting Assessors entitlement to initiate procedures where the candidates are subjected to self-disclosure, self-expression and self-description. The approach draws upon power relations which Foucault (1977) proposed as 'tactics'. This can be observed in Extract 20, lines 147-149: "edge of your subconscious and your conscious (.) you you something (.) you <u>just get</u> a feeling". Here, a parallel to inter-

subjective relational qualities within therapeutic relationships (Rogers, 1975, cited in Dryden 2007, pg.160) can be drawn, when the Assessor attunes to the candidate's responses: "it's gone from a <u>feeling</u> (.) to you <u>are</u> recognising the <u>things</u> they're (.) ah they're <u>not saying</u> (.)" (Extract 20, lines 151-152). This allows the Assessor to explore further, due to their having the "expert knowledge" acquired through experiences and by proxy from the Organisational Psychologists, in line with Foucault's (1980) notions of "knowledge and power". "I was interviewing people (.) and having to assess them (.) and I could see the deficiencies in that (.) I wanted to drill <u>down</u> into areas our process did not <u>allow</u> … I actually uh (.) got in contact with (Organisational Psychologist's name) at that stage" (Extract 19, lines 66-70). This statement qualifies the use of AC practices. From this position the Assessor is able to mobilise 'power-knowledge' whereby "power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen" (Foucault, 1980, pg.154), as demonstrated in Extract 19, lines 73-76: "is that (.) <u>greater</u> depth that you get about somebody [(.)] you (.) you <u>uncover</u> things that don't come out from a single biographical interview".

In Extract 21 the use of "discursive practices" (Clegg, 1989) can be observed. These practices are mobilised through the manner in which the candidates are questioned, with the Assessor drawing upon a subjective style of questioning which may be found in psychotherapeutic practices (Dryden, 2007, pg. 212). This constitutes a subjectivity where the candidates have motivations that are to be uncovered by the Assessors: "you don't let them drift off into another area (.) you <u>wind</u> them<u> back</u>", "you <u>say</u> ah (.) just take me back in <u>there</u>", "talk me <u>through</u>" (Extract 21, lines 132-133).

However, there are major distinctions between the two spaces. Within the therapeutic space the relationship between therapist and client is guided by stringent ethical practices enforced by regulatory bodies and boundaries are established to safeguard the client in the exploration of their material (BPS, UKCP, BACP). With the support and guidance of the therapist the client discovers and unfolds this material in their own time, in order to experience themself differently (Rogers, 1975; Dryden, 2007). ACs do not have the same guidelines but they are still concerned with the subconscious, in order to gain a sense of the "real you" in the candidate: "you <u>push</u> someone to give a bit more" (Extract 21, line 131). The difference is that the AC's processes permit Assessors to directly explore the candidate's experiences and to probe further to ascertain the relevant information required for the role. Once again, this is due to Foucault's 'power-knowledge' in action, which warrants procedures that "drill down": "sort of (.) have my interest piqued in some of the questions and I drill down a bit further' (Extract 22, line 33-34). The process of assessing the candidates is also supported by the psychometric tests, which act to bolster the "power of psychology" (Rose, 1991) that underpins the ACs procedures, and provide a 'touchstone' for the Assessors: "and then (.) I can't wait to see the person's psychs to see is how it matches up" (Extract 22, line 34).

The distinction between the "discursive practices" underpinning the models of psychotherapy (Clegg, 1989) and the AC process can be viewed in the following statement: "ask them some (.) <u>sometimes</u> (.) a little <u>unexpected</u> (.) you know (.) <u>what time</u> of day was this (.) was it in the morning or the afternoon (.) was this in <u>your</u> office (.) where did you <u>meet</u> (.) and <u>throw </u>in things (.) about (.) things <u>that</u> they (.) <u>should </u>be able (.) to answer really quickly' (Extract 21, lines 133-137). In ACs, the

Assessors are able to access more detail in order to uncover motivations, and to clarify and confirm the examples given: "and just see if it's consistent" (Extract 21, line 137).

Extract 23: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 18

121 **P:** subsequently been on a (.)NEO course and that's given me the
122   confidence (.) in the wash-ups (.) when people have said ah (.) this is how they behaved on
123   the day this is what they have done (.) how does that fit with the psychometrics and stuff so
124   that's you know (.) that can only be provided by someone with that sort of psychology
125   background

Extract 24: Organisational Psychologist Assessor – Participant 18

288 **P** that's what I find interesting sort of a (.) mini
289   validation each time of what's in the personality profile and what shown (.) and also sometimes
290   when there isn't that (.) you know somebody's (.) come across (.) as (.) completely say
291   confident or they come across in whatever way in their personality people have said something
292   which is really (.) struck (.) by one of the Assessors (.) and it's either been so strong that he or
293   she will say this is definitely what they are like or other people say yeah I agree with that I saw
294   that as well in this (.) and then I'm looking at the profile thinking that doesn't strongly come
295   across to what's gone on there is there something in the sort of profile (.) that (.) you know or
296   the behaviours or what (.) that candidates has even tried to show on the day (.) to try and be
297   someone or do something that they've interacted with the Assessors (.) the way they interact ah
298   (.) the way the Assessor interact with them (.) as to what came out I find that bit quite
299   interesting (.) um and then like I said there is often an overlap but sometimes it very interesting
300   when there isn't so much (.) and you try sort of think about what's gone on there in terms of
301   either they've answered the personality questionnaire (.) or the way that they've ah (.) been
302   assessed on the day

Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn between a Clinical Assessment's "Actuarial Judgment", which is reached through the use of tools such as DSM-IV TVR (1994), and an AC's Personality Assessment, which uses NEO Five Factor Personality Inventory Psychometric tests (Cattell, 1996; Eysenck, 1953). These bestow a position of 'power' and "expert knowledge" to the Assessor (Foucault, 1980),

qualifying them to explore the candidate's subconscious motivations. Moreover, Rose's (1996) notions of "power of psychology" are visible when the Assessor is provided with confidence in profiling the candidate's personality due to prior training in NEO assessments, as seen in Extracts 23-24: "subsequently <u>been</u> on a (.) NEO <u>course</u> and <u>that's</u> given me the confidence (.) in the <u>wash-ups</u>" (Extract 23, lines 121-122). This is a result of the NEO Five Factor Personality Inventory having adopted a "scientific discourse" where the psychologist's version of events are warranted and given "more voice" over the "subject, whose experience is being interpreted" (Howitt, 1991). The Assessor continues: "psychometrics and stuff so that's you know (.) <u>that</u> can <u>only</u> be provided <u>by</u> someone with <u>that</u> sort of psychology background" (Extract 23, lines 123-125).

From this viewpoint the candidate is seen as fully understandable: "in the <u>wash-ups</u> (.) when people have said ah (.) this is how they<u> behaved </u>on the <u>day</u> this is what they have <u>done</u> (.) how does that <u>fit </u>with the psychometrics' (Extract 23, lines 122-123). The psychometric tests act as the touchstone, "a (.) mini validation <u>each time</u> of what's in the personality profile and what <u>shown</u>" (Extract 24, lines 288-289), with the psychometric tests bringing to light misalignments between Assessors or psychometric tests, "also <u>sometimes</u> when there <u>isn't</u> that (.) you know<u> somebody's</u> (.) <u>come across</u> (.) <u>as</u> (.) <u>completely</u> say <u>confident</u>" (Extract 24, lines 289-291), "and it's either been so strong that he or she will say this is <u>definitely</u> what they are like or other people say yeah I agree with that I saw that as well in this (.) and then I'm looking at the profile thinking that doesn't strongly <u>come across</u> to what's gone on <u>there</u>' (Extract 24, lines 292-295). The speaker accounts for a mismatch in results by attributing (Edwards & Potter, 1992) the misalignment of personality profiling and Assessors' scores as the candidate's error: 'you try sort of think about what's <u>gone on there</u> in terms of <u>either</u> they've answered the <u>personality questionnaire</u> (.) or the way that <u>they've </u>ah (.) been <u>assessed</u> on the day" (Extract 24, lines 300-302).

However it could be argued that, depending on the perceived situation, particular traits may dominate at any given time, rendering trait-driven testing unpredictable and likely to overlook inconsistencies in human behaviour (Mischel, 1968, cited in Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pg. 97). Instead, it could be proposed that the candidate's personality or 'self' may be seen as socially constructed within the context of the day, in relation to the Assessor and the AC process: "the <u>behaviours</u> or what (.) that candidates has even tried to <u>show</u> on the <u>day</u> (.) to try and <u>be </u>someone or <u>do</u> something that <u>they've</u> interacted with the Assessors (.) the way they interact ah (.) the way the Assessor interact with <u>them</u> (.) as to what <u>came out</u>' (Extract 24, lines 296-298). In this context, the Post-Structuralist framework offers a view, suggesting that a misalignment in results may be due to a fluidity of the 'self' in any given context. The 'self' is not fixed (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Henriques, et al, 1984) as the Personality Inventories might suggest; or that variations in personality tests are due to human error. Identity may be provisional, impermanent, fluid, undetermined and not an "essential component of the subject" (Townley, 1993). Indeed, it can be argued that identities are not set and definite but *always* relational: "one can only ever be seen to be something in relation to something else" (Clegg, 1989, pg.159).

Discussion

In this study, insights into the experience of ACs through 'talk' were developed, in order to explore what takes place in the relational space beyond exercises and tests. Four apparent themes emerged, each with a dominant discourse.

The first theme is that of "Assessment Centres: a Necessary Evil". In this theme, the discourse of "Necessary Evil" emerged. Here candidates and assessors had to actively manage a juxtaposed position surrounding their notions of ACs. This was achieved by advocating the procedural practices as 'necessary' in order to "weed people out", thus managing their resistance and the need to comply. This terminology also grants entitlement to the procedures and permits the Assessors to perform the processes of assessment. At the same time, the Organisational Psychologists are located as the "process experts". This acts to validate the procedures, bolsters entitlement to practices, and ensures that Internal Assessors are held accountable.

The second theme involved Assessors stepping into "Assessor Mode". A dilemma of taking up the position of Assessor arose which was managed by shifting into 'Assessor Mode'. The dominant discourse here was one of embodying a 'Neutral Stance', from which the rest of the assessment practices could be carried out. However, there was an effect on the candidates as a result of the Assessors' stepping into this 'Neutral Stance', which candidates perceived as 'off putting' due to an attempt to interrelate.

The third discourse theme that emerged was one of 'Ordering Past Selves'. Here, candidates presented prior experiences in order to show competencies required for the role. To demonstrate competencies effectively, candidates needed to re-order (remember) the past in the present context. It was essential that the candidates present the past in a manner that aligned with the Assessors, the norms of the AC, the organisation and role. Candidates prepared examples to use on the day, having researched the organisation and competencies required for the role. However, dilemmas in re-ordering the past arose when a failure to align occurred. This was due to over-preparation where examples were perceived as contrived, or where a 'crowbarring' of the prepared sets of examples did not account for the requirements of the questions asked, with the result that responses were seen as arbitrary. Candidates also attributed failure to align to the Assessors' "Neutral Stance", and reported that they were unable to convey the past as they had wished, making the presented examples erroneous.

In the fourth and final theme a discourse of 'Drilling Down' became apparent, where Assessors look to uncover the true nature of candidates. This was achieved through a style of questioning similar to that used by some contemporary psychotherapists; but a major distinction separating the style of questioning in AC's arose – the NEO 5 personality profiling incorporated within the AC process acts as a touchstone should there be any discrepancy of results. This approach positions the candidate as fully understandable. When misalignment did occur, it was viewed as being the result of pretence either in the way the candidate had answered the personality profile or the exercise questions.

Discourse Analysis was used in this study to provide an insight into the experience of participating in ACs. As the discourses individuals use enable one to gain an awareness of an individual's "ways of seeing the world" and "ways of being in the world", Discourse Analysis aims to detect and bring to light the positioning people do through language (Willig, 2008). It offers a means of investigating the ways in which contradictory subjects may be presented in order to "blame, persuade and describe" a perceived situation, and is accomplished through the inspection of spoken and written language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Madill & Barkham, 1997). Nevertheless, as within any research methodology there are limitations. In particular, it could be argued that it is still the analyst who decides what to concentrate on and what to abandon within the data (Wetherell, 1998). With this in mind the researcher needs to acknowledge the 'reflexivity' of the research process and the risk that Discourse Analysis is seen not as neutral but as reflecting a "particular world-view and set of interests" (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). However, this limitation is not just a flaw within the methodological process which other research processes could overcome, but a matter of the truth being unattainable (ibid).

> *………Rather, all knowledge is considered to be situated, contingent and partial. Truth is unattainable because reality itself is not single or static, and reality is also inevitably influenced and altered by any processes through which a researcher attempts to investigate and represent it.*
> (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001)

This is a sharp contrast to previous studies surrounding ACs. In Goodge's (1997) study (cited in McKenna, 2006, pg.577), written self-reports by candidates were used after the completion of exercises, with results suggesting that the experience of attending the AC "empowered the individual by allowing participants to collect information and think through the assessments", thus providing them with greater insight into their own performance. This current study indicates a marked resistance towards ACs, and candidates reported being unsure of their own performance after each exercise. This finding is also in contrast to Silvester's study (Silvester et al, 2002), which considered candidate's presentation of self to be in line with attribution and impression management, where the use of specific types of causal attribution was more effective in communicating positive impressions during interviews. Instead, this study considers candidates to be engaging in acts of 'social remembering', where the candidate aligns past experiences to the cultural norms of the AC and the desired role in order to present the required competences. In doing so accurately, a positive impression of the candidate was formed during interviews.

Positioned in line with the 'Social Constructionist framework' this study views attribution not as a cognitive process of presenting oneself in a particular manner within a setting, as held by traditional social psychology (Neuberg & Fiskes, 1987), but rather as an in-talk-interaction (Dickerson, 2000). Therefore, to further explore the claims made by Silvester's study (Silvester et al, 2002), which considered candidate's presentation of self to be in line with traditional psychological views of attribution and impression management, future research is recommended, where ethnomethodology and conversation analysis could be used to research the attribution processes which take place *during* the in-talk-interactions (Dickerson, 2000) between assessors and candidates in ACs. This would offer deeper insight due to observation of the moment-by-moment interaction between assessor and

candidate, as well as offering a richer data due to the physical elements of the interaction and space being taken into account.

In conclusion, this study does not question whether exercises and tests are accurate in finding the "right applicant for the role", but rather proposes a framework for understanding the interactional implications and the impact they have on the procedural process. It appears unavoidable for the assessor and candidate to have an influence on each other, as both are embodied in the procedures and in a state of relating at all times, as well as being subjugated to certain positions within the AC. From a Social Construction viewpoint, this study has analysed the social influences that can be seen throughout the AC process. These influences range from the notions that surround and warrant AC procedures, all the way through to the way in which the candidate's personality 'self' is understood; and proposing that an attempting to remove the Assessor from the processes through the use of a 'Neutral Stance' is unattainable. It is therefore suggested that the processes of ACs should incorporate the relational effects observed in this research into the assessments.

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