



Huma, Bogdana ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0482-9580>, Stokoe, Elizabeth and Sikveland, Rein Ove (2021) Vocabularies of social influence: Managing the moral accountability of influencing another. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60 (2). pp. 319-339.

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# Vocabularies of social influence: Managing the moral accountability of influencing another

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While there are many definitions and conceptual accounts of ‘persuasion’ and other forms of social influence, social scientists lack empirical insight into how and when people actually use terms like ‘persuade’, ‘convince’, ‘change somebody’s mind’ – what we call the *vocabularies of social influence* – in actual social interaction. We collected instances of the spontaneous use of these and other social influence terms (such as ‘schmoozing’ and ‘hoodwinking’) in face-to-face and telephone conversations across multiple domestic and institutional settings. The recorded data were transcribed and analysed using discursive psychology and conversation analysis with a focus on the actions accomplished in and through the use of social influence terms. We found that when speakers use ‘persuading’ – but not ‘convincing’ or ‘changing somebody’s mind’ – it is in the service of orienting to the moral accountability of influencing others. The specificity with which social actors deploy these terms demonstrates the continued importance of developing our understandings of the meaning of words – especially psychological ones – via their vernacular use by ordinary people in the first instance, rather than have psychologists reify, operationalize, and build an architecture for social psychology without paying attention to what people actually do with the ‘psychological thesaurus’.

As a cornerstone topic of social psychology, persuasion has been the focus of theoretical and empirical work for decades. To date, scholars of persuasion do not agree on how to define persuasion (Gass & Seiter, 2018), nor on where it sits within the social influence (SI) landscape. While much is written about what ‘persuading’ somebody means, and about its relationship with other terms such as ‘convincing’ (Miller, 2012), ‘coercing’ (Schein *et al.*, 1961), or ‘compliance-seeking’ (Sanders & Fitch, 2001), instead of providing conceptual clarity, these often-incompatible reflections create confusion. We suggest that a different starting point – one that builds off the vernacular use of SI categories – may open up new ways of understanding persuasion.

Drawing on a large data set of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring interactions from domestic and institutional settings, we use conversation analysis (CA) and discursive psychology (DP) to shed empirical light on how SI vocabularies are

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employed spontaneously in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. We analyse cases that include not only terms and phrases that psychologists have already explored, such as ‘persuading’, ‘convincing’, and ‘changing somebody’s mind’, but also categories such as ‘schmoozing’ and ‘hoodwinking’, which, despite being in common usage, are the kinds of vernacular starting points that are not typically adopted, and operationalized, in research.

This paper contributes to discursive psychology’s project of examining psychological predicates in talk-in-interaction, through ‘[a] conceptual analysis of language in use and [an] empirical study of how people talk within cultural settings’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 288). Although we are not the first to consider the value of studying the semantic landscape of social influence (see, for instance, Miller, 2012), our study is – to the best of our knowledge – the only one to take an empirical approach to this task, by scrutinizing the spontaneous use of SI vocabularies in real talk. We treat the flexibility and variability in speakers’ use of SI categories not as a flaw of discourse, but as a resource that individuals exploit as they build courses of social action. Our analysis will show that speakers use different SI terms for systematically different purposes. These purposes are related to the fact that influencing another person involves curtailing their autonomy, thus producing a moral dilemma or some accountability on the part of the influencer. We found that speakers managed these interests by deploying different SI categories that construct influencers as more or less entitled to direct influencees’ courses of action.

We start by reviewing extant reflections on the meaning of persuasion and other SI categories, which go back as far as to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and originate not only from within psychology, but also from philosophy and literature.

### ***Theoretical reflections on what is and what is not persuasion***

As noted above, scholars do not agree about how specific lexical items map onto conceptual distinctions among SI categories. ‘Persuasion’, in particular, has amassed over twenty definitions (Gass & Seiter, 2004). It occupies a crowded conceptual space in psychology, making it difficult to be precise about what counts as persuasion: ‘Some of its aliases include terms such as *advising, brainwashing, coercion, compliance-gaining, convincing, education, indoctrination, influence, manipulation, and propaganda*’ (Gass & Seiter, 2018, p. 73, emphasis in original). Moreover, from attempting to identify the constituent words, phrases, and actions of persuasive practices, in institutional settings where ‘persuasion’ – shifting someone from one robustly held stance to another – is often the *raison d’être* for the interaction (Humă, Stokoe, & Sikveland, 2019), we identified one particular endogenous hurdle to studying persuasion: people involved in doing it work hard to camouflage their agenda. In other words, people rely on the ‘defeasibility’ of social actions to deny that persuasion is what they are doing (cf. Edwards, 2005; Speer, 2017).

Within the semantic landscape of social influence – a psychological category often used as an ‘umbrella term’ to refer to a range of interpersonal actions that shape another’s conduct – there is a widespread consensus about the distinction between persuasion and a few other SI categories. For instance, it is widely accepted that ‘manipulation’, unlike ‘persuasion’, advances the influencers’ agenda (Harré, 1985) and relies on misleading the influencees (Billig & Marinho, 2014). ‘Coercing’ somebody differs from ‘persuading’ them because the former relies on implicit or explicit threats and leads to strictly restricting the influencee’s freedom to respond (Kaposi, 2017). However, distinguishing ‘persuasion’ from other SI categories is not always straightforward.

The relationship between 'persuasion' and 'conviction' is probably one of the oldest and most debated distinctions. Among the first scholars to address this issue, Rousseau (1762/2002) differentiated between them on the basis of two inter-related features: (1) the type of argument used and (2) the type of response engendered by the influence attempt. Persuasion supposedly mobilizes people to action by appealing to their emotions (but see Diggs, 1964 for a different position), while conviction uses reason to change people's minds about a particular state of affairs. In their *Treatise on Argumentation*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) propose a different semantic division of labour: they use 'persuasion' to refer to arguments tailored to a specific audience and 'conviction' to designate argumentation which holds true for any individual.

Within psychology, similar to Rosseau (1762/2002), Miller (2012) tracked a longstanding distinction between 'being persuaded' and 'being convinced' on the basis of the emotional versus logical strategies through which influencing attempts are implemented. He then went on to challenge the clear-cut separation between the two SI categories, by highlighting that all persuasive language could have emotional overtones. Kapferer (2002) also differentiated between 'being persuaded' and 'being convinced'. He remarked that, in French, the latter connotes a more socially acceptable outcome, while the former phrase is often avoided due to the embarrassment associated with succumbing to another person's influence: 'Persuasion is perceived as a defeat, as misleading, as bowing to another; it means accepting the power of another who controls me' (Kapferer, 2002, p. 21). This line of thought highlights the moral dimension of social influence and presses for an answer to the question: Is persuasion a moral pursuit? So far, scholars of persuasion have argued for the neutrality of persuasion (Cialdini, 1999; Diggs, 1964) claiming it is an amoral means which can be used for either honourable or nefarious ends. But, as our analysis will reveal, persuading others is actually treated as a morally accountable undertaking, and not a neutral action such as, say, asking, advising, or making recommendations.

The debate regarding the partial semantic overlap between 'persuading' and 'convincing' has also been taken up in various media outlets (see Heffer, 2010; Shovel, 2011). One argument for the disambiguation of these terms can be traced back to their grammar (Bryson, 2002; Johns, 1991). While 'persuade' often collocates with an action verb, such as 'The cold caller persuaded me to change my energy provider', 'convince' is regularly followed by an objective statement such as 'The cold caller convinced me that the new energy provider has cheaper rates'. However, as our analysis reveals (see Extract 5), the semantics of 'convincing' are not grammatically bound to the association with statements.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the reviewed reflections on the semantics of SI categories. First, these conceptual analyses reveal core issues for persuasion scholars, such as logical versus emotional arguments and changing a person's mind and/or their behaviour. But, as we discover through our analysis of vernacular uses of SI categories, these are not members' concerns when discussing social influence as a practical matter in everyday life. Second, extant conceptual analyses of SI vocabularies are not informed by a systematic scrutiny of actual occasions in which the terms have been used; therefore, there is no empirical basis on which to adjudicate between competing definitions. Third, the criteria used to differentiate between SI categories often take the argumentative action out of context or unduly focus on some aspects of the communicative conduct while ignoring others. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) highlight: 'the difference between the terms *convincing* and *persuading* is always unprecise and in practice must remain so' (p. 29, italics in original). This observation is taken one step further by

discursive psychology which treats psychological predicates as ‘flexible, not merely in the sense of containing non-central members and having fuzzy boundaries, but in the sense of taking meaning indexically, and in indefinitely many specific ways, from contexts of situated use’ (Edwards, 1991, p. 517). It is this situated meaning-in-use which we examine empirically in this paper, in the tradition established by discursive psychology, which we briefly outline next.

### **Discursive Psychology’s project of studying the ‘psychological thesaurus’**

Discursive psychologists treat individuals’ thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or memories as practical matters dealt with in and through talk-in-interaction and not as private cognitive processes that presumably precede, underpin, and direct human conduct (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Psychological predicates – terms and phrases commonly used to refer to mental processes, states, and traits – make up a subset of the resources that individuals draw on when managing everyday practical issues.

Discursive psychology’s treatment of psychological predicates resonates with Mills’s (1940) seminal argument that vocabularies of motive (e.g., accounts, justifications, and reasons) have a coordinating not a referential function and, thus, are organized by interactional not cognitive structures. Discursive psychologists were also influenced, in their treatment of language, by ordinary language philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1986), who has argued against the existence of a private language, and Gilbert Ryle (2009), who has disputed the mind–body dualism. While also drawing on Wittgensteinian philosophy, Coulter’s conceptual analysis of ‘the mind in action’, which aims to uncover the rules that govern the proper use of cognitive predicates, is different and, on occasion, at odds with DP’s empirical examination of psychological predicates (Coulter, 1999, 2004; Potter & Edwards, 2003). Unlike DP, Coulter’s (1989, 1999) praxeological approach discounts the diversity and variability which characterize everyday usage of psychological predicates and reproves their referential use in ordinary conversations. Discursive psychologists, in turn, hold that if we come across variations or contradictions within discourse, it ‘is precisely what we need to study’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 272).

A key finding across empirical DP studies of the vernacular use of psychological predicates has been their immense flexibility and rhetorical affordances lending them the potential to be worked up in conjunction with other conversational resources to achieve nuanced interactional effects *in situ*. For example, examining emotion discourse, Edwards (1999) illustrates how emotion categories can be deployed to construct an individual’s behaviour as a transient reaction to a triggering event (‘I was boiling at this stage and I was real angry with Connie’) (p. 274), but also as an enduring personality trait (‘He was a jealous person’) (*idem*). Edwards’s approach embraces the apparently inconsistent uses of emotion categories showing that and how speakers exploit the inherent flexibility, ambiguity, and defeasibility of psychological predicates for particular interactional effects.

DP research has documented the rhetorical and interactional effects of the occasioned use of psychological predicates (Potter & Edwards, 2003), revealing, for example: how callers use displays of concern to justify calling a child protection helpline (Potter & Hepburn, 2003), how individuals report ‘first thoughts’ to strengthen the credibility of stories of anomalous events (Jefferson, 2004a), or how speakers preface dispreferred responses with honesty phrases to foreground their sincerity and integrity (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006). Furthermore, prospective clients are more likely to agree to mediation

when they are asked if they are *willing*, not if they are *interested* to mediate (Sikveland & Stokoe, 2016) and persons threatening to commit suicide more often accept police negotiator's proposals to *peak* than to *talk* to them (Sikveland & Stokoe, in press). By showing that sometimes even a single word can make a difference in the outcome of an interaction, discursive psychologists have demonstrated the importance of paying close attention to vocabularies in vernacular language.

Participants' lexical choices often display their orientations to a situated moral order and illuminate alternative inferences about situated rights, responsibilities, duties, and rules that are applicable to the situation at hand (Cromdal & Tholander, 2012). For example, vocabularies of complaining like 'moaning', 'whinging', or 'grumbling' foreground the subject side of complaining implying that the complainer may be the kind of person who is inclined to easily find fault with others. This, in turn, may lead to their complaints being dismissed or taken less seriously (Edwards, 2005). When disputed by interactants, lexical choices reveal the moral work they do in the adjudication of blame or wrongdoing. For example, establishing whether a suspect 'pushed' an alleged victim, or whether the victim 'fell', has implications for the suspect's culpability in and seriousness of an offence (Stokoe, 2010). Thus, lexical choices constitute an important resource for accomplishing moral work and, as we show in our analysis, the choice between formulating a course of action as 'persuading' or 'convincing' illuminates the moral accountability of influencing another when this means infringing their autonomy.

In sum, DP's approach to the study of the psychological thesaurus diverges from conceptual, semantic, or etymological analyses of psychological predicates which 'tend to aim for *coherence*, as if the word's meaning was always that whole package, scenario and all, and it all gets wheeled out for use on each occasion' (Edwards, 1999, p. 281 emphasis in original). Instead of asking what psychological predicates *mean*, discursive psychologists are interested in what they actually *do* in interaction. In line with DP's focus on action orientation and rhetorical use of psychological vocabularies, we explore what individuals *do* with SI vocabularies. In particular, we are interested in the moral work accomplished through SI categories and how their flexibility allows influencers to distance themselves from potentially objectionable actions.

## Data and method

The data comprise naturally occurring face-to-face and telephone conversations, in British English, from both domestic and institutional settings. To assemble our collection, we undertook an extensive search through data corpora that were available to us, comprising a total of over 100 hours of interactions recorded in the United Kingdom. We identified 46 cases<sup>1</sup> in which SI vocabularies were spontaneously employed (rather than elicited). These cases are taken from across 11 different settings (see Table 1) which strengthens and widens the applicability and relevance of our findings.

Our search, which yielded 46 cases, was conducted as follows. We initially looked for spontaneous uses of 'persuade' and other forms of this lexeme. The search yielded 15 results. We then expanded the search to two other SI categories which are often associated with persuasion: 'convince' and 'changing [pronoun]'s mind' which extended our collection by 26 additional cases. Finally, we identified five further cases by extending

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<sup>1</sup> While we often observed that speakers engaged in attempts at influencing others, they rarely used SI categories to formulate their own actions towards co-present parties.



**Table 1.** Overview of the settings where the data were recorded

Settings	Count
Incoming and outgoing calls to mediation services	18
Hostage negotiations with people in crisis	9
Police interrogations of suspects	4
Business-to-business 'cold' calls	3
Students' mealtime interactions	3
University tutorials	3
Incoming calls to environmental health services	2
Antisocial behaviour unit meetings	1
Incoming telemarketing calls	1
Mediation meetings	1
Speed dating interactions	1

our search to include vernacular SI categories and phrases. Table 2 provides a concise overview of our collection which comprises formulations of social influence in the 1<sup>st</sup> person (e.g., 'I've been trying to persuade him'), the 2<sup>nd</sup> person (e.g., 'you could persuade him'), the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (e.g., 'she's going to try and persuade me'), as well as impersonal formulations (e.g., 'it took a lot of persuading I think really').

For each data corpus, ethical approval had been received at the time when the data were collected. The corpora have been assembled, stored, and used in accord with The British Psychological Society's (2014) guidelines for human research ethics. We anonymized the data by replacing identity-related information with equivalent pseudonyms. We transcribed the extracts using the Jefferson (2004b) system for CA that captures the prosodic, phonetic, and sequential features of talk-in-interaction. We examined the data using discursive psychology (Wiggins, 2017) and conversation analysis (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) which are inductive methods for analysing naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. DP and CA exhibit a high degree of compatibility which allows for the transfer and application of analytic principles and empirical findings across both analytic frameworks. The analysis of each extract focused on the actions accomplished by the speakers, as well as the activities in which they were engaged. We also scrutinized the design of turn constructional units, turns at talk, and sequences of turns through which the actions and activities were accomplished. Finally, we noted relevant aspects of word selection and use of membership categories. Our analysis follows CA-underpinned DP standards for methodological integrity and rigour (Humă et al., 2020). We adopted an iterative analytic strategy, comprising several rounds of analysis in which we focused on

**Table 2.** Overview of the collection of social influence categorizes

Terms or phrases	Count
Persuade/persuaded/persuading/persuasion	15
Change/changing/changed my/your mind	15
Convince/convinced/convincing	11
Put a bit of pressure on	1
Talked me round	1
Worked him round	1
Schmooze	1
Hoodwink	1

each individual case, as well as on recurrent patterns across the collection. The extracts presented in this paper are the clearest illustrations of the practices we found in our collection. The analysis abstains from speculating about what participants' talk could reveal about what they may be thinking or feeling and, instead, explicates what they are doing as evidenced by participants' displayed orientations towards those actions.

## Analysis

The analysis has been divided in three sections. First, we take a close look at the meaning-in-use of 'persuasion'. We show how participants treat persuading others as problematic because it infringes the persuadees' rights to make autonomous decisions. Next, we turn to 'convince' and 'change somebody's mind' – two SI categories that have traditionally been compared and contrasted with persuasion. We find that the situated use of these categories fails to support theoretical accounts of their meaning as outlined in section 1.1. Finally, we explore the situated deployment of two terms ('schmooze', and 'hoodwink') that do not appear in psychological theory or experimentation at all. Our exploration of these categories provides insights into participants' practices for managing the moral accountability of influencing others.

### 'Persuading'

In Extract 1, a prospective client (C) calls family mediation to request an information assessment meeting (IAM) as part of a court agreement. While the IAM (referred to in lines 2–3 as 'that first meeting') is court-mandated, C is not required to continue with mediation beyond this meeting. Prior to line 1, which occurs approximately 12 minutes into the call, the mediator (M) collected background information about C's case, learning that she is separated from her ex-partner John with whom she has a one-year-old baby boy. John has been banned from contacting C, due to a history of domestic abuse.

#### *Extract 1 FMNE 1, Outgoing family mediation call*

- 1 M: U::hm, well they- th- the mediator would: ↑uhm go  
 2 through all of that u::hm, ↓with you:. Uh::m at that  
 3 first meeting.=So: #I- (.) uh:m th- certainly the  
 4 intention should be: ((baby noise)) that by the end of  
 5 the meeting you be absolutely clear .h as to whether or  
 6 not mediation uh::m might be uht possibl:e (.)  
 7 uh:::m .HHHh pkt uht possibly suitable for you:. .HHH  
 8 A:nd also: (.) you know if it's not suitable then (.)  
 9 that's absolutely fine too. .hh [Because t]here's=  
 10 C: [(>Oka-< )]  
 11 M: =there's there's three people who uh- need to make that  
 12 decision:.=That's you: .hh that's John and also the  
 13 mediator. .hhh (0.2) A:lright?=.So you're not pushed  
 14 into anything.=The- the purpose of this meeting is not  
 15 to persuade you to mediate. .HHHH [ Th ]e=  
 16 C: [(>Yeah<)]  
 17 M: =purpose of the meeting is to tell you abou:t  
 18 me:diation and a:lso about other alternatives that are  
 19 open to you: .HHHH [Uh:m ]  
 20 C: [Okay.]



Before focusing on lines 14–15, where our target words are uttered, we start by describing the interactional context in which the term is deployed. Our analysis will show that the discursive environment of the term ‘persuade’ elucidates the intersubjective meaning-in-use ascribed to the term by the participants. To clarify, by ‘meaning-in-use’ we understand the occasioned inferences that are demonstrably indexed by the situated use of ‘persuade’ (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1986). Following on, the rest of the extracts in this section will illustrate a similar pattern, thus providing evidence for the recurrent, systematic, albeit interactively occasioned use of the term.

Prior to line 1, M has described what will happen at the IAM. She is getting close to the end of her exposition, as signalled by the turn-initial ‘U::hm well’ (Schegloff, 2010) and the summarizing phrase ‘all of that’ (line 2). In line 3, M produces an upshot (Heritage & Watson, 1979) of her account highlighting that the IAM is ostensibly aimed at enabling C to judge whether mediation is suitable for her situation. M’s self-repair (lines 6–7) from ‘whether or not mediation uh::m might be uht possibl:e’ to ‘uh::m.HHHh pkt uht possibly suitable for you:.’ invites C to appraise the option of continuing with mediation not in absolute terms – whether her case is ‘mediatable’ (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007, p. 11) – but in relative terms – whether she deems mediation to be an appropriate solution for her. M adds that ‘A:nd also: (.) you know if it’s not suitable then (.) that’s absolutely fine too.’ (lines 8–9) which treats rejecting mediation as the less preferred, albeit acceptable, result of the IAM. In overlap with C’s acknowledgement (line 10), M continues with an explanation that introduces another crucial and potentially upsetting detail (note M’s inbreath in line 12 before mentioning John) about the IAM: C’s partner John will also be consulted about going further with mediation. And indeed, C refrains from acknowledging this new detail and passes her turn at the transition relevance place in line 13.

M continues her turn with an explicit response solicitation ‘A:lrigh?’ (line 13) which indicates her orientation to potential resistance (Hepburn & Potter, 2011). Using an inferential ‘So’ (Schiffrin, 1987), she provides another upshot of her whole turn-so-far ‘So you’re not pushed into anything.’ (lines 13–14). This upshot orients to the possibility that C might expect that, during the IAM, she might be talked into signing her up to mediation, a concern which she directly addresses in lines 14–15 and 17–19: ‘The- the purpose of this meeting is not to persuade you to mediate..HHHH The purpose of the meeting is to tell you about: me:diation and a:ls: about other alternatives that are open to you:’. Through the contrast structure (Smith, 1978), which juxtaposes ‘persuading’ and ‘telling’ (note the contrastive emphasis on ‘tell you’) the mediator denies that the IAM is aimed at influencing C. She treats persuading clients to sign up for mediation as unacceptable because the latter should independently decide to mediate. Persuading them would equate to ‘pushing’ them into a direction that benefits the mediators. By disavowing persuasion, M appears, on the record, to uphold neutrality and refrain from influencing C, in accord with the mediation ethos.

We will see a similar pattern of contrasting persuading with another talk-based activity – explaining – in the next extract, also from a family mediation call. The mediator (M) is the caller, returning a missed call from a prospective client (C) who had left a message requesting to cancel her IAM with a view to rescheduling it sometime in the future. Prior to line 1, C had justified the cancellation by explaining that the issues she is dealing with cannot be addressed through mediation. In lines 1–3, the mediator gently corrects that assumption and then goes on to make a case for C attending the IAM.

Extract 2 FMNE 18, *Outgoing family mediation call*

- 1 M: =Yes. .H I mean you've go:t it sounds like you've got  
 2 several different issues there .hh a:nd you can deal  
 3 with all of them in mediation but it depe:nds on the  
 4 facts on you:r (0.2) yo- you know you:r particular  
 5 situation .hh and that's why you at[te:nd] one of=  
 6 C: [Yeah.]  
 7 M: =these assessment meetings.= 'Cause medi- .hh it's not  
 8 ↑our jo:b (.) .HHHhh to persuade you to mediate.  
 9 (.)  
 10 M: It's our job to explain to you what the alternatives  
 11 are there for you, .H so that you're in the best  
 12 position to make the choice.

As in Extract 1, our target predicate occupies the first part of a contrast structure 'Cause medi-hh it's not ↑our jo:b (.) .HHHhh to persuade you to mediate. (.) It's our job to explain to you what the alternatives are there for you,' (lines 7–11). The contrast structure is deployed in an argument for C to attend an IAM. In line 1, M produces a *pro forma* acknowledgement of C's reasons for cancelling the meeting, while also working up a way to undercut it. Through the modifier 'it sounds like' M treats C's account as the client's subjective worked-up version of the situation, rather than an objective depiction of her circumstances. This framing allows alternative accounts to be heard not as disagreements, but as different interpretations of the situation. She goes on to contradict C's assumption that some of her issues are not mediatable 'you can deal with all of them in mediation', an assertion which she qualifies by highlighting that it all depends on C's specific circumstances. The use of the common knowledge component 'you know' invites C to recognize what those specific circumstances are without M having to spell them out (Stokoe, 2012). C's agreement comes in slightly late (line 6), so M continues her turn past the transition relevance place with an upshot 'and that's why you atte:nd one of these assessment meetings' (line 5). This is followed by a latched turn constructional unit (TCU) containing an explicit disavowal of the intention to persuade C to sign up for mediation "'Cause medi-hh it's not ↑our jo:b (.) .HHHhh to persuade you to mediate.'" (lines 7–8). M ties her denial to the obligations and restrictions associated with the mediator professional identity, which strengthens the credibility of her assertion (Stokoe, 2010). Furthermore, this category-based denial extends M's avowal for neutrality to any mediator that C might encounter in the future.

In the second part of the contrast structure 'It's our job to explain to you what the alternatives are there for you' (lines 10–11), M further portrays mediators as having the obligation to support clients' autonomy not only by presenting them with the set of alternative solutions of their specific circumstances, but also by explaining those alternatives to them. The choice of the verb 'explain' to contrast with 'persuade' is not happenstance. It indexes an asymmetry, between mediator and client, not only in the knowledge about possible options for issues the latter is dealing with, but also in understanding the complexities of those options. C is positioned as insufficiently knowledgeable about mediation. and, as such, her decision to cancel the meeting is attributed to a lack of knowledge, which further undermines her rejection of mediation.

The next extract comes from a civil mediation call. The mediator (M) has contacted a client (C) who was referred to mediation by social services in order to resolve a dispute with a childcare organization. In the course of the call, which is occupied with arranging a visit from the mediators, the client bemoans the difficulties of caring for four children, especially for her youngest daughter who has a developmental disorder that severely impacts her well-being to the extent that she has trouble getting proper nourishment and 'has to be pe:rsuaded' (line 7) to eat.

*Extract 3 EC 52 Outgoing civil mediation call*

1 C: Thee uh five and six year old they seem to be fi:ne,  
 2 (0.2) .hhhhh (0.2) ↓but this one she can't talk yet she  
 3 can't speak and she can't hear pro:perly¿  
 4 (0.5)  
 5 M: Ri:gh[t. Uh ]  
 6 C: [An' she dolesn't eat or drink #mkhht ↓very we:ll.  
 7 (.) [She h]as to be pe:rsuaded and .hhhhh ↓it's just=  
 8 M: [O:h:..]  
 9 C: =the very ssoft ba:by food an' V[ery soft] yoghurts=  
 10 M: [ Righ' ]  
 11 C: =that she can swa:llow,

The speaker here ascribes the label 'persuasion' to conduct performed upon her ill daughter who is struggling to take in nourishment because of her developmental disorder. The frail health of the child is described via a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of inabilities 'she can't talk yet she can't speak and she can't hear pro:perly' (lines 2–3). After a delayed acknowledgement token from the mediator, the caller continues with an 'and-prefaced' turn (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994) that links the child's eating and drinking difficulties to her developmental disorder. She then explains how she deals with her daughter's food intake difficulties and positions herself as a responsible mother who manages the competing concerns of ensuring the child takes in sufficient food while also not being forced to eat (Hogg *et al.*, 2014; Wiggins & Hepburn, 2007). She formulates the feeding as a reluctant but unavoidable action 'She has to be pe:rsuaded' (line 7). The use of an impersonal construction conveys that persuading a child to eat is not bound to this particular mother, but to anyone with caring responsibilities. The omission of the persuasive agent accomplishes a distancing from that action indicating reluctance to be associated with it. Furthermore, the label 'persuasion' (unlike 'conviction' – see Extract 5) indexes the daughter's legitimate resistance to the food intake and indicates it is dealt with by reaching a compromise, such as feeding the child easy-to-swallow food (line 9–11).

The last extract in this section, from a call to an environmental health services helpline, features a citizen (C) enquiring about the rules regarding bonfires.

*Extract 4 EH 65 Incoming environmental health helpline call*

1 C: No:w, (.) Is there any ru:les regulations things I need  
 2 to b- to: worry about if I want to have ay: (.)  
 3 bonfire?  
 4 (0.6)  
 5 CT: We:ll (0.5) ↑I would (.) try: an' persuade (0.3)  
 6 ↓someone not to have a fbonfi(h)ref,  
 7 (0.4)  
 8 C: [O:h well there ( ) ] comes nee:d when:=  
 9 CT: [( ) possible]  
 10 C: =w- n- >the u[h< Duhu]huhu  
 11 CT: [UM:::~:]  
 12 CT: .HHHH Well let's put it this wa:y I can't stop (0.3)  
 13 someone (.) having a bonfire if: (0.4) you know (.) if  
 14 they [are] determined to ha:ve one.=  
 15 C: [mm ]  
 16 CT: =.HHHHH But u- usually we get (.) the complaints you  
 17 see about people.

In lines 5–6, instead of providing the requested information about bonfire regulations, the call taker (CT) produces a transformative answer (Stivers & Hayashi, 2010) that conveys the undesirability of having a bonfire, indirectly challenging the caller's announced plan as implied by his question (Wilson, 1980). This is not the response C's question was projecting, a misfittedness which is adumbrated by the 0.6 gap in line 4 and managed through the turn-initial 'well' (Heritage, 2015) which sets up the reply as favouring the speaker's and not the recipient's perspective. CT mitigates the harshness of her deterring move through the use of hedging '↑I would (.) try: an' persuade', smiley voice, and the aspiration particles within '£bonfi(h)re£' (Potter & Hepburn, 2010). She also displays reluctance to deliver a dispreferred response (Bilmes, 2014) through frequent in-turn hesitations.

In this extract, the term 'persuade' belongs to a hendiadic construction (Hopper, 2001), comprising two separate actions 'trying' and 'persuading' that are describing the influence attempt. The first component accomplishes a display of the speaker's intention to deter C from having a bonfire, an intention further hedged through the modal verb 'would' that frames her aim as a hypothetical and unlikely to be attained (Edwards, 2006). The verb 'persuade' further softens the force of the influence attempt positioning the call taker as not entitled to issue interdictions on having bonfires. This is explicated in her subsequent turn 'I can't stop (0.3) someone (.) having a bonfire' followed by an account for it (lines 16–17) both in response to C's pursuit of his plan in lines 8 and 10. The action of preventing bonfires is not directed at the interlocutor, but at a non-specific 'someone', which further mitigates disaffiliation.

*Summary.* In this section, we highlighted both recurrent and idiosyncratic features of the spontaneous use of 'persuade' in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. The meticulous examination of the fine details of participants' talk aimed to demonstrate that and how the situated understandings of persuasion are 'through and through practical accomplishments' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1986, p. 160); that is, they are built in and through talk that orients to the interlocutor's position and the interactional environment. Across all extracts, the references to persuasion revealed that and how to persuade somebody is either disavowed or reluctantly admitted by speakers. Importantly, the grounds for persuasion being objectionable were located in the situated identities of the parties-to-persuasion. Specifically, the persuadees were treated as having autonomy over the domains of action which would presumably have been the focus of the persuasive attempts. Persuaders were positioned as unentitled to influence the persuadees' conduct which would have meant curtailing their autonomy. In conclusion, by formulating some conduct as 'persuasion' a speaker orients to the deontic configuration of the situation and acknowledges the persuadee's agency and the persuader's lack of entitlement to direct the former's actions.

### **'Convincing' and 'changing somebody's mind'**

We move now to the examination of the meaning-in-use of two other SI categories, 'convincing' and 'changing somebody's mind', which have often been compared and contrasted with persuasion.

The next extract features the term 'convince' and comes from a meeting of an antisocial behaviour unit (ASBU). We see the chair of the meeting (C) complaining about the lack of involvement of senior level representatives from partner institutions, which she puts forward as the cause for the unit not operating effectively.

## Extract 5 ASBM 4, ASBU steering group meeting

1 C: .Hhh uh:m and because >you know we-< the structure i:s  
 2 (.) the working groups to be pulled together sort of  
 3 beneath this group.=But this really operates like a  
 4 working group and shouldn't. Mcht .hhh It should  
 5 operate and uh- >as a-< a strategic level.=But because  
 6 we don't get the bu:y-in from the senior >officers<.=So  
 7 I don't wanna put people off atte:nding, .hhh But my  
 8 concern is that we really need to try'n- an' make it  
 9 what- what it wa:s, <You know we need to convince (0.2)  
 10 Paul Hou:sley and the other el pee you inspectors to  
 11 be °here.° .hh Uhm uhm you know uhm, (0.4) that that  
 12 for me is (0.5) the way to move it fo:ward. .HHhhHH  
 13 U::hm because if it- if it doesn't >sort of< †AND IT'S  
 14 N†OT Just the p'lice. (0.2) It's not- it's not just the  
 15 lack of commitment from the p'lice, it's a massive lack  
 16 of commitment (.) °here (.) from Countyborough as  
 17 well,°

The turn starting in line 1 is part of a complaint sequence in which C voices her dissatisfaction with ASBU's current (dis)organization. The complaint identifies the deviation from the unit's envisaged structure as the problematic aspect (Drew, 1998) which is further traced back to the lack of support from senior police officers 'But because we don't get the bu:y-in from the senior> officers<' (lines 5–6). The complaint is followed by a collective call to action 'we really need to try'n- an' make it what- what it wa:s,' (lines 8–9) which suggests that the current situation is an undesirable development that could be undone. C's proposed solution of getting senior police inspectors to attend the meeting is framed as a necessary and righteous course of action '<You know we need to convince (0.2) Paul Hou:sley and the other el pee you inspectors to be °here.°' (lines 9–11). The TCU-initial common knowledge component grounds the proposal in the participants' presumed shared understanding and interpretation of the situation which enables her to formulate the appeal as a collective rather than an individually supported course of action. Note also how the choice in the action and place formulation 'to be °here.°' (as opposed to, say, 'to come to the meeting') also contributes to the construction of the inspectors' participation as the right thing to do and, by implication, their absence constitutes culpable conduct to be remedied (Drew, 2013).

While in the previous extracts we saw how participants used 'persuade' in constructions that disavowed or displayed reluctance to influence others, here, by contrast, the speaker produces a strong appeal for getting the police inspectors to attend ASBU meetings. In and through the complaint sequence, the speaker conveys a strong sense of entitlement to implement her course of action, while also holding the police officers accountable for their absence. Unlike in previous cases, the influencees' autonomy is not at stake because they have failed to fulfil their duties to ASBU. Thus, based on our analysis so far we can surmise that 'persuade' and 'convince' index distinct kinds of social influence that are flexibly used to fit with different deontic and moral rights that characterize the ostensible relationship between influencer and influencee.

The next case features the phrase 'change somebody's mind' which is often considered synonymous with persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). The extract

originates from a dramatic setting: a crisis negotiation between a police negotiator (N) and a person in crisis (PiC) located on a rooftop and threatening to commit suicide. Following prolonged resistance from PiC, we join the conversation after he had agreed to come down and to be taken to an assessment centre. But prior to line 1, he starts backtracking by asking N to confirm that he is not going to change these arrangements.

*Extract 6 HN 10\_11 Hostage negotiation*

- 1 N: There's no need for me to break any promises, (0.8)  
 2 uhthm  
 3 (6.6)  
 4 N: We can think about going to that Spurs game next  
 5 season.  
 6 (17.1)  
 7 N: A:nd looking at that course >to help< (0.6) children  
 8 like your mum does.  
 9 (1.3)  
 10 N: She's obviously a loving lady isn't she. Helping all  
 11 those children,  
 12 (10.3)  
 13 PiC: See you you're winding me up now you're making me  
 14 change my mi(h)nd.  
 15 N: <Why?>  
 16 (0.5)  
 17 PiC: Well like asking me about Spurs games (and) ((inaudible  
 18 due to noise))  
 19 N: Huhuh fwhyf is that.  
 20 (0.5)  
 21 PiC: It's just winding me u:p.

Lines 1–18 feature the negotiator claiming (lines 1–2) and then demonstrating (lines 4–5 and 7–8) that he is committed to keeping the promises he had made to PiC which had led him to announce that he would come down from the rooftop. With no engagement from PiC (notice the long gaps at lines 3, 6, and 9), N changes the tack, praising PiC's mum in pursuit of a response from him (lines 10–11). After another long silence (line 12), PiC announces that he is in the course of reverting his commitment to coming down. He invokes N's prior actions, which are ostensibly 'winding him up' (lines 13 and 21), as the cause for this. By attributing the responsibility for the change in plans to his interlocutor, PiC both manages the rational accountability of his conduct (Garfinkel, 1967) and maintains the appearance of integrity despite reversing his position. Note also how the formulation 'you're making me change my mi(h)nd.' indexes PiC's new position as an independently worked out response to N's actions. PiC also pre-empts further attempts from N to get him to come down by implying that N's actions have been upsetting him. This places N in an infelicitous position, because he has inadvertently deterred PiC from coming down.

This rhetorical effect could not have been achieved through the use of 'persuade' or 'convince' which index the influencer's intention. PiC staying on the roof top is at odds with N's efforts throughout their interaction and, thus, cannot be attributed to N's ostensible intention. As such, changing somebody's mind, even as a result of another person's influence, becomes a display of autonomy on the part of the influencee.



**‘Schmoozing’ and ‘hoodwinking’**

So far, we have shown that the vernacular meaning-in-use of established SI categories – persuade, convince, and change somebody’s mind – takes on empirical forms that differ, markedly, from how they have been hitherto defined and conceptualized in social psychology. Next, we bring to the forefront two other psychological predicates – schmooze and hoodwink – that have not received any theoretical attention yet.

Extract 7 is part of a business-to-business sales call initiated by a salesperson (S) who has contacted a prospective customer (P) to arrange a meeting to pitch him a new multifunctional printer. Prior to line 1, P has already refused to meet and has resisted several attempts from S to reverse his position.

*Extract 7 Eplur 53, Outgoing business-to-business telesales call*

- 1 S: .hh Well agai:n I mean the longevity and that if you  
 2 get a good response, .h It could be a good  
 3 investment.=I see what you’re s[aying now.]  
 4 P: [ Absolut]ely.  
 5 Yeah,=absolutely.=So is- so i- is as I say rather than  
 6 um meeting at the moment .h it’s quite a tentative  
 7 thing, .h (0.2) So: uhm (0.4) I:: (0.5) e- *effectively*  
 8 *need to schmooze Bob into saying look, this is actually*  
 9 *a good idea and is effe:ctive.* .h [So] let’s leave it=  
 10 S: [()]  
 11 P: =for now?  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 P: [Uhm] but I’ll take that on board.=That’s- that’s=  
 14 S: [()]  
 15 P: =honestly not a problem.

As an IT consultant, P’s role is to advise the company’s manager Bob (mentioned in line 8) on whether to invest in the new printer based on the results of an ongoing pilot project (referred to in lines 1–3). S’s first turn projects a hypothetical positive outcome of the pilot project which then enables him to frame the printer purchase as ‘a good investment’ (lines 2–3). P agrees with S’s proposal and closes down this sequence. Keeping the floor, he starts a new TCU that recycles a previous refusal of the meeting ‘as I say rather than um meeting at the moment.h it’s quite a tentative thing,’ (lines 5–6). P explains that, in order to go ahead with the meeting, the manager would need to be on board with the investment, which could be accomplished via ‘schmoozing’ him. P indicates that getting Bob to change his position and consider the investment ‘*actually* a good idea’ would take some effort on his part – note the contrastive adverbial modifier (Athanasiadou, 2007; Clift, 2001). P’s use of ‘schmooze’ also implies that he would get Bob to take ownership of the investment initiative, not just agree to P’s proposal. This suggests schmoozing requires subtle and undetectable influence directed at an individual who is formally in charge of making decisions. If effective, schmoozing leaves the influencee unaware of the influencer’s action rendering their new position as having been arrived at independently.

The jocular undertone of ‘schmoozing’ enables P to play down the gravity of admitting that he is considering to surreptitiously influence Bob. Unlike manipulation, which presumes deceiving or misleading others (Billig & Marinho, 2014) for the benefit of the manipulator, schmoozing frames the influencer’s action as an innocuous attempt, thus alleviating its moral sensitivity.

Handling the accountability of gaining benefits from influencing others appears to be one of the tasks of SI categories. In the extract below, we see how this is achieved via the use of 'hoodwink' coupled with non-seriousness and laughter. We are in the same telesales setting with a salesperson having called a school to inquire about the status of the institution's printer contract with a view to approaching them 'at the right t<sub>i</sub>:me' (line 4).

*Extract 8 Tech 37, Outgoing business-to-business telesales call*

- 1 P: [Right  
2 S: [Can I just ↑ask you if you know .h when they're  
3 looking to: uhm: review an' when the contract expires  
4 for us to approach at the right t<sub>i</sub>:me?  
5 (.)  
6 P: Five years. .Hh [We don't- we don't-] Okay. .h=  
7 S: [(Quite a long time)]  
8 P: =We don't act'llly have a(c-) contract.=Oum- our parish  
9 council actually pay for ours;  
10 (0.8)  
11 S: <Your parish counci:l [do they?]  
12 P: [Y e a h,] They do:.  
13 (0.4)  
14 S: <Oh=I see, So #a >↑how has that< come about ↓if I might  
15 ask you, Are you a church school or >somethin'?<=  
16 P: =No:.=We just managed to hoodwink them.=h .Hh  
17 (0.3)  
18 S: I see!: So it- it's- .h they've (0.3) >pay for you  
19 fo- < for the first t<sub>i</sub>:me is it?  
20 [Or is it historical? ] [( )]  
21 P: [No(h). No. It's >the< se|cond year. hh [uhm second]  
22 time, So we've got a n- n# (. ) ( ) two five-year slots  
23 we've ha:d h .hh  
24 S: Oh they pay pay completely fo:[r for] the contract,=  
25 P: [Yeh. ]  
26 S: =So that involves all the maintenance  
27 consumable:s, [the lot?]  
28 P: [ Y e s. ] Yes.

In lines 6 and 8–9, the prospect informs the caller that they have a five-year printer contract that is being paid for by the parish council. The salesperson treats this as unusual (line 11) and then elicits more details about how this financial arrangement was made (lines 14–15). In line 16, P responds they have 'just managed to hoodwink them.=h.Hh'. P's formulation implies the parish council is not expected nor required to pay for their printers, as they are not a 'church school' (line 5). She invites her interlocutor to treat her response as non-serious through the post-positioned laughter particle (Jefferson, 1979) which fits with 'hoodwinking' as an informal term with humorous connotations implying that the school has 'tricked' the parish council into paying for their printers. The turn as a whole is designed to convey that the response should not be taken literally, but instead understood as the prospect treating the state of affairs as an unlikely/unexpected outcome (note also the minimizing preface 'just managed') (Lee, 1987). Inviting a non-serious hearing of the explanation, the humour renders further investigation into the origins of this financial arrangement difficult to pursue. Indeed, the salesperson receipts the answer and moves forward by asking how long the financial arrangement has been in place. The

humorous production of this turn is also indicative of potential delicacy associated with a 'serious' use of 'hoodwink' which would position the hoodwinker in a morally untenable position because it would imply the use of deceitful influence (Edwards, 2007).

## Discussion

This paper has employed discursive psychological to uncover the way that people use specific lexical items – collectively the vocabulary of social influence – in real-life interactions. Rather than defining terms like 'persuade' or 'convince' to operationalize for experimental or other types of research, we examined their use 'in the wild', where they naturally belong. Our analysis of interaction in settings including service encounters and crisis negotiation found that SI categories are used, alongside other discursive practices and resources (such as contrast structures, hedges, minimizers, or non-seriousness), to attend to the accountability of influencing others. That is, we found that trying to change another person's stance is oriented to in and through the systematic deployment of specific, though, for most psychologists, near-synonymous words and phrases. While all examined SI categories acknowledge influencees' potential or actual resistance to the courses of action promoted by the influencers, their opposition, and implicitly the attempt to reverse it, is constructed differently in and through the use of different formulations of social influence. Thus, the paper is the first to provide empirical insight into how influencers manage the acceptability of their conduct through specific SI categories that either highlight or obscure influencees' rights to resist the proposed courses of action.

We started by reviewing existing conceptual analyses of the semantic division of labour within the social influence landscape and their limited insight into the flexibility and defeasibility of the meaning-in-use of SI categories. In response to the inconsistencies in the conceptualization of SI, our paper puts forward a methodological pathway that enables researchers to untangle the threads of SI vocabularies and to make headway towards an integrated understanding of how various kinds of interpersonal influence attempts are brought off. Our empirical findings are at odds with extant reflections on the distinction between 'persuading' and 'convincing' someone and also fail to support treating 'persuading' and 'changing somebody's mind' as equivalent.

While most of the parallels between 'persuading' and 'convincing' focused on argument content and behavioural/attitudinal responses to it, our analysis revealed that these terms index different deontic stances (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012) within the influencer-influencee dyad. Speakers formulated their influence attempt as 'persuasion' when they constructed the persuadees as autonomous agents who should decide whether to accept or reject the proposed course of action. At the same time, they oriented to their own lack of entitlement to exert influence over persuadees. Nowhere in our collection do we see speakers explicitly announcing they have or will persuade others. Persuasion was treated as a violation of the deontic order and either disavowed (Extracts 1 and 2) or presented as reluctantly implemented (Extracts 3 and 4). By contrast, when conduct was glossed as conviction, the speaker positioned themselves as highly entitled to change influencees' behaviour which was depicted as transgressive.

Our analysis also uncovered that individuals do not treat persuading and changing somebody's mind as equivalent forms of influence. While further exploration of the nuances of autonomy as indexed by 'changing my mind' versus 'changing your mind' would be welcome, still, our findings tentatively call into question the mainstream conceptualization of persuasion as 'changing somebody's mind'. In fact, to change one's mind as a result of another person's influence is treated as an agentic endeavour, the result

of a deliberate action on the part of the influencee. While both categories of social influence acknowledge the influencee's independence, persuading somebody is constructed as infringing their autonomy (cf. Kapferer, 2002), while changing their mind allows them to retain their independence even when they abandon their original position.

We also found that influencing others without their knowledge, as indexed by terms such as 'schmoozing' and 'hoodwinking', is treated as problematic by speakers who employ humour to neutralize the immorality of their conduct (Bergmann, 1998). Importantly, the non-seriousness of these formulations is accomplished through the concerted use of SI categories and other discursive practices, which provides evidence for the situated meaning-in-use of psychological predicates (Edwards, 1999).

Overall, this paper has demonstrated that speakers orient to the morality of influencing others and that the extent to which they hold themselves accountable depends on the deontic configuration of the situation (i.e., who has the right to determine future courses of action in a particular domain) and on how influencees' resistance is dealt with. Our findings challenge prior theoretical reflections which argued for the amorality of persuasion (e.g., Cialdini, 1999; Diggs, 1964). We tentatively speculate that the moral challenges with which influencers are confronted may explicate why real-life persuasive conduct is defeasible, disguised, or concealed (Gibson & Smart, 2017; Humă et al., 2019; Humă et al. 2020), for instance, by being packaged as advice (cf. Gass & Seiter, 2018). Finally, we contend that we need more empirical research into social influence 'in the wild' aimed at illuminating how individuals manage the moral issues associated with overstepping deontic boundaries and curbing others' autonomy.

## Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Derek Edwards and Charles Antaki with whom we have had stimulating discussions about discursive psychology and the conceptualization of persuasion. Thanks also to the members of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group (Loughborough University) and the Discursive Social Psychology Research Group (York St John University) for their valuable analytic insights shared in data sessions. We are also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and the editor, Ann Weatherall, for their thoughtful and encouraging comments that have guided us in the revision of the paper.

## Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Author contribution

Bogdana Huma, Ph.D. (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing) Elizabeth Stokoe (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing – review & editing) Rein Ove Sikveland (Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing – review & editing).

## Data availability statement

In line with conversation analytic methodology, anonymized data that support the findings presented in this study are included in the paper and have been published alongside their

respective analyses. The data corpora from which these data originate are not publicly available due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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Received 30 April 2020; revised version received 8 July 2020