"Basically it's the Usual Whole Teen Girl Thing": Stage-of-Life Categories on a Children's and Young people's Helpline

Jakob Cromdal, Susan Danby, Michael Emmison, Karin Osvaldsson and Charlotte Cobb-More

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“BASICALLY IT’S THE USUAL WHOLE TEEN GIRL THING”:
STAGE-OF-LIFE CATEGORIES ON A CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S
HELPLINE

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“BASICALLY IT’S THE USUAL WHOLE TEEN GIRL THING”:
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HELPLINE

This article explores the practices of membership categorization in the interactions of clients and counselors on a national Australian helpline (Kids Helpline [KHL]) for children and young persons. Our focus is on membership categories drawn from three membership category devices (MCDs): stage-of-life (SOL), age, and family. Analysis draws on data across different contact modalities—email and web-counseling sessions—to examine how category-generated features are relevantly occasioned, attended to, and managed by the parties in the course of interaction. This shows clients’ use of MCDs in presenting their trouble and building a relevant case for their grievance. By examining counselors’ subsequent receipts of the clients’ complaints, we are able to trace some of the cultural knowledge that the clients’ categorizations make relevant to the counselors. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates how the inherent flexibility of MCDs allows counselors to exploit these same categorial resources and to respecify the clients’ trouble in a more positive fashion to accomplish counseling work. In explicating how taken-for-granted notions of the lifespan as well as of family relations are mobilized by participants in KHL’s sessions, the findings contribute to previous studies of social interaction in counseling, and to research on social identity and categorization more broadly.
“BASICALLY IT’S THE USUAL WHOLE TEEN GIRL THING”:
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INTRODUCTION

References to distinct phases in the life course are common in everyday interaction; terms like “child,” “brat,” “old git,” or other such person-descriptors serve as ways of managing identities in discourse. As Atkinson (1980:34) pointed out, they comprise a version of the lifespan that members in society treat as a “natural fact.” Like other membership categories, lifespan terms are “inference rich” (Sacks 1972) in that “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories” (Sacks 1992, Vol. 1:40). Hence, lifespan categories allow members to bring on board a spectrum of subtexts, expectations, and commonsense understandings about the persons being so categorized. As Nikander (2009) points out:

. . . [C]hronological age and lifespan categories and other interactional formulations of age surface and are made relevant for and by us, implicitly or explicitly, as we position each other or describe and account for our own and others’ actions in various everyday settings. (p. 864)

In other words, such categories are part of the cultural “tool kit” (Laz 1998:102) through which notions of the self, roles, and identities are being constructed, maintained, or contested in the routine course of everyday life (Gubrium et al. 1994). Notions of a natural lifetime thus comprise “cultural events that members make happen on each and every actual occasion of categorization” (Atkinson 1980:35). In this article, we show how such notions inform a specific institutional practice by examining the use of stage-of-life (SOL) categories in young people’s communications with the Kids Helpline (KHL), an Australian helpline service
specializing in counseling young persons. Specifically, we target the ways in which SOL, “age,” and “family” categories are made relevant by the parties, and how they are attended to and handled in the ensuing interaction—how they are mobilized in the flow of interaction to bring on board “implied meanings that are oriented to as common sense knowledge” (Stokoe 2009:76). By examining how such membership categories are used to assemble actions such as trouble descriptions, empathic receipts, and suggestions for the future, we show, in effect, how cultural knowledge related to age and the lifespan operates in a specific institutional practice—counseling with young people.

Social Interaction, Membership Categorization, and Counseling

In the wake of Sacks’ early studies of telephone calls to a suicide prevention center (e.g., Sacks [1964] 1992, Vol. 1), scholars in ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and later in discursive psychology have taken great interest in analyzing social interaction in lay-professional settings such as counseling, therapy, and other service-oriented encounters. In broad terms, analyses typically focus on features of sequential organization and turn design to examine how social actions are oriented towards certain interactional and institutional goals. In this body of work, a strand of particular relevance for the present study concerns the different practices for advice-giving. Such practices are often described as normative, in the sense that one party recommends a certain type of behavior or course of action to another (e.g., Vehviläinen 2001; Waring 2007), and bring on board asymmetric epistemic relations (Heritage and Sefi 1992). For that reason, professional advice-giving is often locally sensitive towards interpersonal as well as institutional concerns and involves much finer interactional work than simply telling clients what (not) to do.

Several previous studies of telephone calls to the Australian Kids Helpline (Butler et al. 2010; Danby et al. 2015a; Emmison and Danby 2007) have examined the methodic practices by which direct advice-giving is avoided. Here, rather than telling clients how to go
about solving their problems, counselors would seek to help callers find the remedy themselves by asking questions tailored to that effect, or by proffering script proposals by which callers were suggested what they might say to a third party. While the practice of not offering advice may at first appear at odds with the work of a helpline, according to Butler et al. (2010) this is in keeping with the institutional aim of providing support, and to empower and promote callers’ self-directiveness.

Much of the past work in conversation analysis on advice-giving has focused on generic forms of conversational organization—matters of turn, action, and sequence—to explore the particularly “institutional” character of talk (Boden and Zimmerman 1991) in counseling settings. Fewer studies, however, have examined the use of membership categories in counseling interaction. As an early example of this approach, we find Watson’s (1978) analysis of a telephone call to a British suicide prevention service. Here, the analysis shows how the caller—an elderly widow—complains about the lack of support from her church, despite the fact that the members of other congregations are enjoying support from their religious institutions. In presenting her grievance, the caller assembles a set of “moral profiles” using membership categories from race and religion (Whites – Blacks; Jewish – Catholic – Protestant) to build “complaints, accusations, excuses, and other ‘blame-negotiators’” (Watson 1978:106). Watson’s analysis further demonstrates how the counselor uses the self-same categorial resources from the caller’s complaint to recast her own role in the reported events, thereby undercutting the basis of her grievance, and how the caller subsequently invokes new categorial features to forestall further challenges.

In a recent study of calls to the Australian Kids Helpline, Danby et al. (2015a) observe how accounts of domestic trouble assembled around the MCD “family” are used to co-construe a specific type of family role reversals known in the literature as “parentification” (cf. Jankowski et al. 2013; McMahon and Luthar 2007). By this practice,
counselors “expand, with the client, shared understandings of family categories and relationships as they unfold” (Danby et al. 2015a:593), whereby “natural” versions of a life course are juxtaposed and contrasted with the reported circumstances of the client. For the counselors, this offers a way of ratifying clients’ accounts as well as displaying their understanding of and sympathy with the clients’ situation.

In another recent study, O’Neill and LeCouteur (2014) point to the use of different MCDs between clients and therapists within family therapy. They show how two parents describe the problematic school situation of their disabled son highlighting his special needs, and the failure of the school’s staff to attend to those needs. O’Neill and LeCouteur (2014) analyze the organization of this description along the “disability” MCD, and point to the therapist’s methodical effort to reconstruct the description of the son’s trouble in terms of adolescence and maturation. By switching MCDs in this way, a therapeutic reframing of the problem was offered and a less problematic, prospectively-oriented account was eventually adopted by the parents.

While it may be unsurprising to find that lifespan MCs, and in particular “the lifetime-category boundedness of particular activities” (Atkinson 1980:44), are recurring topics in the work of service institutions dedicated to helping and counseling young persons, the literature on how such categorial resources are brought about to enhance these institutions’ work is scarce. In the present analysis, we focus on the use of age and SOL categories as well as other category-implicative descriptors (Stokoe 2009) in KHL counseling sessions. Our attention is on the relation between the accounts of trouble and their ensuing receipts—which may involve unpacking, rephrasing, or re-construing certain categorial aspects of the accounts—to examine the work of counseling young persons. In so doing, we propose to demonstrate how cultural notions of a natural lifetime—packaged as category-generated features—are mobilized in the service of the parties’ “explicative work” (Watson 1986) involved in making
sense of and working out a possible remedy for the client’s trouble. By demonstrating the methodical use of membership categories across clients’ accounts and counselors’ corresponding actions, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge of professional counseling (see Danby et al. 2015b, for a review) and, more generally, to current work in MCA in studies of institutional interaction.

SETTING, DATA, AND ANALYSIS

Kids Helpline

The Australian Kids Helpline counseling service is the only Australian helpline that caters specifically for children and young people up to the age of 25. Established in 1991, the helpline includes 24/7 telephone counseling, web chat, and email. During 2013, 245,711 contacts were made by children and young people to reach KHL (Boystown 2013). A variety of mental health concerns comprise the most common reason for making contact. Approximately 100 employees, who are professional counselors with university qualifications, staff the help line. Trained to respond to individual client needs in line with the helpline philosophy of “We care, we listen,” counselors encourage their clients to work through their problems and arrive at their own solutions.

Data

This paper reports on data collected as part of a broader research programme on the impact of technological modality on Kids Helpline, which examined counseling interactions across telephone calls, emails, and synchronous web chat. The corpus entails over 100 emails in their original format, 100 logged web chat sessions and 50 audio-recorded phone calls. Approval was sought from the clients of Kids Helpline to use the recordings/transcripts for research purposes. Once this was granted, the audio-recorded telephone calls and chat/email
logs were provided as digital files. All participants remained anonymous, names were replaced with pseudonyms and identifying information was changed or removed.

**Analysis**

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in different ways of approaching online materials from a conversation analytic (CA) perspective (e.g., Giles et al. 2015). Meredith and Potter (2013) argue for the importance of including screen dumps as well as logging and transcribing keystrikes to provide for a detailed analysis of the unfolding production of actions in online interaction. The chat logs in the corpus on which the current analysis is based do not provide such detail of information concerning the real-time production of chat turns. It needs stressing, however, that these features are equally unavailable to the clients and counselors taking part in the KHL-chats. In effect, the analysis in this article is grounded in the same information that is available to the participants (both chat files and emails are presented in the format they were provided by KHL), which in addition to the posted written message includes the following:

- the time of the day (indicated as “Time” in the transcripts)
- the time elapsed since the beginning of the session (“Session duration”)
- the time elapsed before a turn appeared on screen (“Turn duration”)

To make the reading of the analysis feasible we have added line numbers in the transcripts.

The seven extracts examined in this article are drawn from three counseling episodes across two communicative modalities: asynchronous emails and a synchronous web chat (see Danby et al. 2015a, for an analysis of SOL categorization in telephone calls to the KHL). Generic cases were chosen from the corpus to show the variety of practices through which SOL categories are used to present and receive clients’ problems, which is the topic of the present study. Elsewhere (Danby et al. 2009; Butler et al. 2010), we have already examined how participants to KHL-sessions orient to the different modalities used by the service. To
examine the interactional work accomplished by the clients and counselors of Kids Helpline, in particular, their use of the SOL device, we engage in membership categorization analysis (Jayyusi 1991; Sacks 1972, 1992; Watson 1997) and, due to the nature of the data, to a lesser extent sequential analysis of interaction (Sacks et al. 1974).

Membership categorization analysis (MCA) was developed as a principled, participant-oriented approach to the organization of social relations within everyday life, and is becoming an increasingly more important analytic tool for researchers in discursive psychology who are concerned with “social psychology’s foundational assumptions: the nature of sociality, its mechanism, the relations between self and other, the constitutive relationship between social action and the use of language” (Augustinos and Tileaga 2012:406). Membership categories are (person) descriptors organized in systematic collections, or “devices,” such that the device “classroom” contains (at least) the membership categories “teacher” and “student,” and the device “courtroom” minimally holds categories such a “judge,” “barrister,” “plaintiff,” and “defendant.” Because any person may at any point in time be categorized in multiple ways—all of which may well be “correct,” if not necessarily relevant for the purposes at hand—Sacks (1972) specified a set of rules for the application of membership categories. The economy rule specifies that a single category can be “referentially adequate,” i.e., sufficient to locate the category within a device. For instance, the category “plaintiff” allows us to hear it belonging in the “courtroom” device, whereas “judge” is ambiguous—it can also belong to several devices such as “occupation,” “academic,” and “graduate of law school.” Sacks (1972) therefore formulated a second rule, the consistency rule, which specifies that the categorizing of a person makes relevant other categories drawn from the same device. In practice, if someone has been described as “plaintiff” and someone else as “judge,” then people will hear that the relevant device is “courtroom” for both categories (rather than, say, “courtroom” for the plaintiff and
“occupation” or “academic” for the judge). Sacks (1972) called this rule the “hearer’s maxim,” and it allows members to avoid problems of multiple reference.

There are further features crucial to the functioning of categories and category devices in members’ practical reasoning. For instance, certain practices and activities may be heard as specifically tied to certain categories, or devices. Such category-bound activities (Sacks 1972) are particularly powerful resources, as the very mention of a certain activity may be sufficient for the hearer to infer the proper category, or category device. In addition, membership categories may have certain conventional attributes or predicates: personal traits, preferences, dispositions that members routinely hear as belonging to incumbents of a category. Following Jayyusi (1984):

Categories orientably and conventionally carry with them a cluster [. . .] of expectable features—i.e., the constitutive trait [. . .] carries with it a cluster of related possible actions, traits, preferences, haunts, appearances, places, times, etc. It is the nucleus of other categorization-tied or relevant features which all together provide procedures for situated inferences to a host of other issues regarding category incumbents in their settinged availability. (pp. 26-27)

Crucial to this mode of analysis is the grounding of analytic claims in the local concerns that the members themselves exhibit as part of their interaction. This requires examination of moment-by-moment interaction and, specifically, how categories, devices, and other category-generated features are produced and oriented to as relevant to the business at hand. The analysis to follow shows how categories selected from the SOL device are fitted to the tasks at hand by KHL counselors and their clients, revealing some specifically institutional features of these interactions.

STAGE-OF-LIFE CATEGORIES AS A PARTICANTS’ RESOURCE IN KHL COMMUNICATIONS
In this section, we examine the use of life categories in contacts with the KHL. The analysis begins by showing how SOL categories operate in clients’ presentations of their problem and reason for contacting the service, as well as in counselors’ receipts of such trouble telling (Jefferson and Lee 1981). We then move on to consider some ways in which SOL categories are used in the parties’ attempts to find a possible resolution of the problem.

Our first example shows how category-generated features are built into the client’s initial presentation of her business, and how this presentation is designed to manage the possibility of a dismissive receipt. It is drawn from an early phase of a KHL web chat session with a client who is reporting being worried about her friend’s eating habits. The transcript starts just over a minute into the session, after the client had introduced herself as Anna and declared that, never having used the service before, she is unsure what to say. The data are shown as they appear in the corpus (save for identifying information) with the columns showing, from left to right, (i) line numbers; (ii) party posting the message; (iii) the message, as appearing on screen; (iv) time of post; (v) time into the session; (vi) duration from last post that is, the time it has taken for the post to appear on the recipient’s screen.

Extract 1  (WC102666)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Action/Message</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session duration</th>
<th>Turn duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 (Counselor)</td>
<td>no worries. My name is Owen. I usually talk with people on web for around 40mins</td>
<td>19:00</td>
<td>01:09</td>
<td>00:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 (Counselor)</td>
<td>What would you like to talk about tonight?</td>
<td>19:01</td>
<td>01:20</td>
<td>00:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04 (Client)</td>
<td>whoa..thats along time..um well without sounding totally cliche for a 16 year old friends and stuff</td>
<td>19:01</td>
<td>01:48</td>
<td>00:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 (Counselor)</td>
<td>that's ok Anna. What's been happening.................</td>
<td>19:02</td>
<td>02:15</td>
<td>00:27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following upon the counselor’s introduction and topic-solicitation, the client’s first post (lines 4-5) establishes a link between an age category and the nature of the business that she
brings to the encounter. Albeit clearly sequence-conforming with the counselor’s query, the client’s response starts off with two response tokens “um well” and a disclaimer that exhibits the nonstraightforwardness (Schegloff and Lerner 2009) of her business. At this point, this business is glossed as “friends and stuff,” the sense of which trades on a common sense understanding of the type of issues that recognizably go on among 16-year olds.

However, this commonsense relation between category and activity is also presented as a practical problem for the client: by volunteering that her business as a 16 year old being with “friends and stuff” is (“totally”) hearable as a cliché, she displays a concern about this straightforward interpretative possibility. The client’s action is somewhat similar to the self-qualification practices described by Mori (1999:468), through which interlocutors “acknowledge and [. . .] defocus a competing aspect of the issue before it is pointed out by other participants as a potential source of disagreement.” By pre-empting a possible cliché interpretation, the client may be seen to “establish a position” (Baker 1984:304) highlighting the relevance and seriousness of her case. The counselor’s response in line 6 seems to attend to the client’s concern by licensing a straightforward telling of “what’s been happening,” cliché or not.

Three turns later into the session, the parties are working out the details of the caller’s problem, using membership categories to bring on board commonsense notions of the life span. The client has now explained that one of her friends is overweight and has begun throwing up food, which has caused the client some concern, eventually leading her to turn to KHL for help. Accepting the client’s concern, the counselor asks how she found out about this, and the client explains that she knows her friend really well and begins to elaborate on the friend’s situation:

Extract 2 (WC102666)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Action/Message</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session duration</th>
<th>Turn duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 (Client)</td>
<td>umm basically..its the usual whole teen girl thing</td>
<td>19:05</td>
<td>05:56</td>
<td>00:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>her friends are getting with guys and she sorta has one but its moving real slow</td>
<td>19:06</td>
<td>06:17</td>
<td>00:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04 (Client)</td>
<td>like so mike right...he likes her she likes him but he has his own issues</td>
<td>19:06</td>
<td>06:32</td>
<td>00:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06 (Client)</td>
<td>and she is stubborn and whats it to hurry up</td>
<td>19:06</td>
<td>06:57</td>
<td>00:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07 (Client)</td>
<td>but the throwing up thing started last year</td>
<td>19:06</td>
<td>07:11</td>
<td>00:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08 (Client)</td>
<td>like yr 10 formal and all..pressured to “look good”</td>
<td>19:07</td>
<td>07:33</td>
<td>00:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09 (Counselor)</td>
<td>that’s a long time for that to be happening</td>
<td>19:07</td>
<td>07:55</td>
<td>00:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (Counselor)</td>
<td>has she ever talked with anyone about it?</td>
<td>19:07</td>
<td>08:04</td>
<td>00:09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The client ventures another preliminary formulation of the problem, glossing the friend’s circumstances as “the usual whole teen girl thing.” Again, the formulation is prefaced by an “umm”-token, combined with “basically,” and followed by two dots. Bearing in mind that we are dealing with written communication, and that the recipient can only access the turn after it has been typed in full and sent off to the chat, we suggest that the upshot of this preface is to exhibit the client’s selection among a range of alternative formulations (a process vernacularly known as “thinking about how to put it”). Furthermore, the use of “basically” in preface position seems to suggest that what is to follow is the very gist of the client’s telling, the most fundamental formulation of what she has to say.

The operation of membership categories is evident in this formulation. The client uses the SOL-category “teen girl” together with several generalizing particles to frame the incipient telling as categorically bound to this phase in the lifespan: “usual whole [SOL] thing.” This categorization is a cultural object (Atkinson 1980), inviting a spectrum of inferences that turn on what members generally know about the kind of activities, preferences, or situations in which female teenagers routinely take part. The commonplace
aspects of the circumstances of this particular teenage girl are further emphasised by the two standardising tokens (the whole + usual) preceding the category. In effect, in the context of the current trouble telling, “the whole usual teen girl thing” is produced to be heard as the uttermost standard case of a problematic scenario of a teenage girl. Thus, in contrast to the client’s disclaimer in Extract 1, in which a stereotypic hearing was being defocused, her gloss in the present example seems designed to invite a vernacular understanding of her friends’ situation, an understanding which trades on cultural stereotypes.

The formulation thus serves as a scheme of interpretation (Garfinkel 1967) for the continued telling, in which the client lists several key features that comprise her friend’s current situation. We learn that the other members of the peer group are dating boys and that the client’s friend too has a boyfriend, but their relationship is not developing as smoothly (and quickly) as the friend had been expecting. The narration in lines 2 through 6 thus serves to unpack the initial gloss—it fills “the usual teen girl thing” with specific content.

The documenting of routine teenage girl concerns is offered as biographic background to the actual problem—the eating disorder of the caller’s friend. In line 7, the client thus turns to the issue of throwing up, contrasting her turn with the disjunctive “but.” We learn that this problematic behavior has been going on for a year (which is treated by the counselor as problematic in itself in line 9) and that it began with a specific age-related event, the year 10 formal, for which the friend tried to lose weight due to a “pressure to look good” (line 8).

In the client’s analysis, then, the initial source of the problem is tied to SOL-related aspects of the friend’s circumstances, in particular the age-determined formal at school and a social climate within the peer group that promotes “looking good”—a preoccupation that is categorically linked, in the client’s trouble description, with being a female teenager (“teen girl thing”). A noteworthy feature of this trouble telling is that whereas the circumstances of the
client’s friend are being described in stereotypic, indeed cliché-like terms, the consequences of the situation are presented and received as a serious concern.

Our next set of examples, drawn from a different web counseling session, show how the client’s category-based formulations generate character features tailored to carry across the client’s sense of the problem and how these features are unpacked as part of the counselor’s work of trying to find a way out of the troublesome situation. The client has contacted the helpline because of the problems she is having in her relationship with her mother. As she puts it in answering the counselor’s question about what she would “like to talk about tonight”: “me and my mum are always fighting.” In response to the counselor’s request for further details, the client begins by downplaying her own contribution to the relationship difficulties and suggests that the fights have their origin in very trivial family issues:

**Extract 3 (WC104354)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Action/Message</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session duration</th>
<th>Turn duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>(Client) its lyk over the sillest things.. lyk.. i asked her this week if she could drive me to youth group.. and she just started yelling at me and said no</td>
<td>19:25</td>
<td>05:11</td>
<td>00:53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>(Client) or when i ask my brother to leave my room.. she will interfear and get up me</td>
<td>19:26</td>
<td>05:52</td>
<td>00:41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The client reports that the fights are over the “sillest things” and offers two examples to illustrate: “i asked her this week if she could drive me to youth group.” and “or when i ask my brother to leave the room.” Note that while both requests are presented as legitimate as well as ordinary, the mother’s responses are contrastively cast as over-the-top reactions, that is, atypical as well as problematic. In categorial terms, “mothers” are typically “adults” and, as such, they can be expected to exhibit a more responsible way of dealing with family
quarrels. Yet, the description of the mother’s behavior by the client—“yelling,” “get up me”—is more typical of someone seeking to escalate the dispute and not to resolve it.

In the responding post below, the counselor explicates these categorial inferences.

Indeed, we see in the next extract the counselor inviting the client to entertain the possibility that she become “the adult” and refuse to let the fighting escalate:

**Extract 4 (WC104354)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Action/Message</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session duration</th>
<th>Turn duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>yeh, these can be tricky situations. Sometimes, whilst your mum is the adult, and in a perfect world would try to handle the situation better, it can be more helpful if you try to be the adult and do what you can to stop escalating these times. It would be better if your mum did, but it might be up to you to be the person to not come into the fights. Do you know what I mean by that</td>
<td>19:52</td>
<td>31:49</td>
<td>02:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Counselor) 03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The counseling move seems to involve a form of advice, but provided in “modal” form; rather than telling the client she needs to “become the adult” (a literal impossibility), it is phrased as “it would be helpful if you try to be the adult.” The client is being enjoined to “occupy the slot” normally filled by the adult in a family dispute or argument. As such, we have an appeal to both the SOL and “family” categories. Note that the SOL is a particularly useful device in this context as it provides clear possibilities for moral work to be undertaken in “reversing” the typical category bound responsibilities (cf. Sacks 1992) in relation to solving quarrels or fights:

- **Adult** – calm, rational, clear headed
- **Youth** – easily provoked, hot-headed, stubborn

Through this suggestion, the counselor ratifies and unpacks the categorial inferences underlying the client’s complaint: although the client’s mum is the adult, her current behavior
is not typical of adult behavior. The explicit use of the SOL category is, as Schegloff (2007) notes, a useful way of "protecting against induction." As he puts it:

If an ostensible member of a category appears to contravene what is "known" about members of the category, then people do not revise that knowledge, but see the person as "an exception," "different," or even a defective member of the category. (Schegloff 2007:409)

In other words, the counselor does not invite the client to reconsider her commonsense category knowledge that adults should be better equipped to handle relationship difficulties with their children. To the contrary—the use of SOL is a perfect way of retaining the relevant category knowledge: that is, of the need for a responsible adult way of handling domestic quarrels. In this case, however, the counselor is suggesting that it might have to be the client who has to supply this bit of work by "try[ing] to be the adult."

A few turns later, the counselor explicitly compares the course of action that the client needs to embark on with her mother to that of a parent needing to implement, in order to stop "undesirable behaviour" with younger children.

**Extract 5 (WC104354)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Action/Message</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session duration</th>
<th>Turn duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>let's say if somehow you can stop these fights escalating with your mum for a while often what happens is that will slowly go away. It will be hard work but what can happen is at first your mum will still escalate but after a while her behaviour will get better. I guess it's similar to stopping undesirable behaviour as a parent with younger children, if you don't give them attention when they act out often they slowly stop acting out. What do you think about that?</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>40:23</td>
<td>03:07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the mother is being equated to a "younger child" and the client is being invited to be the "adult" (the parent) in taking the decisive steps to rectify the problematic behavior. We have an elegant reversal of the category-bound activities in the SOL, which also results in
bolstering of the “particular” (how the client’s action might have an impact on her mother) by reference to “the general” (how parents deal with behavioral difficulties with their children). Stokoe’s (2010) analysis of police interrogations shows how moving between “the general” and “the particular” in category-based descriptions allows suspects to bolster denials by reference to character dispositions. In our example, the generalizing, scripted features (Edwards 1994) in lines 5 through 7 make manifest the workings and rationale of the solution, while the particularizing moves in lines 1 through 4 clearly tie that solution to this specific client’s problem.

In this web session, the use of the SOL serves to soften the normativity of the advice, providing resources for the counselor to construct a possible scenario for the client to follow. In this sense, it belongs to the same group of counseling moves as Advice Implicative Interrogatives (Butler et al. 2010), and even Script Proposals (Emmison et al. 2011). Furthermore, it is important to note how the counselor’s soliciting of an opinion about the proposed scenario offers a way of allowing the client to affiliate with, or detach from, the counsel.

The last two examples are drawn from an email correspondence between a KHL counselor and an adult client whose older sister had received all the attention in the family during their childhood years:

**Extract 6** (EM160457) client – email

01 I am starting to convince that myself that the reason why I am not good enough is
02 because I was always second place in everything. Example – the family. My sister
03 always had something happening in her life or always did
04 things better than me. She is 3 years older than me. (There is just the 2 of us in our
05 family) My sister is a very out-going person, I am quiet. Nothing has changed even
06 though we are older she is still centre of attention, even
In the first two lines of this email, the client claims not being “good enough.” Offering her family as an example, she explains how her older sister always did things better and became the center of attention, a family structure that remains valid, although they have both left their parents’ house. By presenting herself as the younger of the two sisters, the client uses a category set (e.g., sister, older sister, parents) drawn from the “family” device, which provides for the analogy of second place in birth yielding her a second place among the children in the family. One part of the client’s trouble then, has to do with not having received her fair share of attention in the family as a child. However, her problem, as stated in line 1, is that she is currently not good enough, with the childhood experiences leading up to the present state. Our final extract shows the counselor’s reply:

Extract 7 (EM160457) Counselor - email

01 ‘Example - the family. My sister always had something happening in her life or always did
02 things better than me’, this makes a lot of sense to me Isabelle – these deep seated beliefs
03 or ‘stories about ourselves’ usually do come from early childhood experiences. As the littlest
04 one, you probably did play 2nd fiddle to your sister. Maybe she even ‘looked down’ on you?
05 Older sisters can be very good at doing that to keep their position in the family hierarchy!
06 But you are now grown up, just as you have grown out of the clothes that no longer fit you
07 or suit you, as an adult, you now have the choice to discard stories about yourself that you
08 no longer want to ‘wear’.

The initial section of this email is marked by the elaborate sympathy work that acts to align with the client’s perspective. The counselor starts by requoting from the client’s previous email, putting a brief section of this text within quotation marks: “Example - the family. My sister always had something happening in her life or always did things better than me.” This
quote is followed immediately by the counselor affirming the client’s stance through suggesting that this example “makes a lot of sense to me Isabelle.” Butler et al. (2011) point out that address terms are resources used to build and maintain a relationship status (Jefferson 1973) and that post-positioned address terms can “demonstrate a particular stance toward or relationship with a recipient” (Lerner 2003:185). The counselor’s use of the address term (line 2), along with his affirming stance, shows this concern to the client.

The descriptions offered by the counselor in the email draw on commonsense understandings of relationships between older and younger sisters. Specifically, the categories “younger sister” – “older sister” form an asymmetrical standardized relational pair (Jayyusi 1984; Sacks 1972) that allows for a specific hearing of the relations between the two sisters as hierarchical. Here, the counselor unpacks the client’s story by adding crucial elements to their relationship: the client was the “littlest one” (line 3) who played “2nd fiddle” (line 4), and the older sister may have “looked down” (line 4) on her younger sister. These category-bound activities (“playing 2nd fiddle” and “looking down” on younger siblings) are straightforwardly inferable from the asymmetric relationship between the two sibling categories; their understanding lying in what everyone knows about the relationship between older and younger sisters, rather than what might be the unique relationship between these two particular sisters.

Thus, the counselor assembles a description of the trouble and its grounding in childhood family relations that aligns with the client’s version in the original email, but also fills it with some specific content that has not been explicitly mentioned. In effect, besides explicating the counselor’s understanding of the client’s complaint, such description acknowledges the client’s feelings about her family relations, and works up a sympathetic stance towards her problem. This is a central feature of the counseling practice as it lays the ground—as common ground—for the next, less affiliative, move. Here, the counselor then
challenges what he has previously called “stories about ourselves” (lines 2 and 3), pointing out that they can be changed. He uses the analogy of outgrown clothes (lines 6-7)—an idiomatic construction suggesting that what the counselor is telling the client is something that anyone can most likely know—to propose that the client, by virtue of having entered adulthood, can put such unwanted experiences behind her.

This extract clearly shows the explicative work of the advising and its relation to the trouble account. Offering a possible way out of the problem, the counselor works from formulations through SOL categories, and category-bound activities moving from the general (“ourselves”), to the particular client (see also Nikander 2002). What was normative behavior as a child is not so for an adult. The disaffiliative implication here, with regard to the client’s complaint, is that by continuing to tell the same story about yourself as the story you told when you were a child is a “childish” behavior—the client is being categorized as a non-standard incumbent of the category “adult.” What is needed to attain adequate category incumbency is for the client to choose a changed story line.

DISCUSSION: CATEGORIES, CULTURE, AND COUNSEL

The work of counseling helplines offers a rich opportunity for analyzing social interaction with a view towards an “understanding of how parties routinely and procedurally produce and experience forms of ‘trouble’ that may emerge as problems and deviance” (Maynard 1988:318). In this article, we have focused on the practice of membership categorization to examine the relationship between clients’ problem presentations and the guidance offered by the counselors. However, practices of guidance or advice-giving often impose normative constraints on their recipients and become problematic in the context of the KHL, where the emphasis is on “empowerment and the promotion of self-directedness so that the client can identify their abilities to come up with a solution to a problem” (Emmison et al. 2011:4). Typically, then, interaction in KHL sessions is geared toward helping the clients
help themselves, rather than furnishing them with counselor-initiated solutions to problems (Butler et al. 2010).

Within this practice, our analysis has centered on the participants’ in situ practices of membership categorization, showing how the categories first used in clients’ descriptions of their problems were also taken on board in the counselors’ attempts to enable clients to identify potential remedies. For example, the client in excerpt 3 built her complaint around her mother’s overreacting over the silliest things. In the subsequent interaction, the counselor first unpacked that complaint in terms of the mother not acting on par with adult expectations (“your mum is the adult, and in a perfect world would try to handle the situation better”). Only thereafter did he move to propose a constructive way of approaching the problem, which notably rests on his category-based explication of client’s complaint (Danby et al. 2015a). The email correspondence in excerpts 6 and 7 offers an even more explicit case of the counselor demonstrably anchoring her understanding of the problem—and the subsequent counsel—in the client’s own phrasing of the complaint. Here, she quotes directly from the client’s email, then offers an elaborate display of understanding based on her recognition of sibling relations in childhood. This display of recognition affords the counselor the means to identify a way out of the impasse—while staying visibly-reportably close to the client’s own formulation of the problem. From this we learn that counselors do not merely ground their work in the categorizations offered by clients. Rather, their work includes making that grounding manifest to the client. Through this practice, we suggest, counselors are able to help clients while “highlight[ing] the position of the client as the principal of the advice” (Emmison et al. 2011:20).

In an important respect, these findings differ from O’Neill and LeCouteur’s (2013) analysis of membership categorization in family therapy. Here, categories from the MCDs SOL and “family” (“adolescent,” “son”) were used by the therapist to reframe, over the
course of several sessions, the clients’ account of trouble originally built around the MCDs “disability” and “school” (“student with special needs”). This replacement of category devices resulted in a new, problem-resolving account of the son’s situation that “opened up a therapeutic solution in which the child was constructed as better able to meet the school’s behavioral requirements, enabling parents to align with, rather than against, the school” (p. 282). The therapist’s displacement of the clients’ categorization clearly differs from the work of KHL counselors analyzed here, as the latter can be seen to accountably make use of the clients’ own categorizations for proposing possible courses of remedial action. Indeed, we take the diverging categorization practices to mirror the differences between the two services and their orientation to, and methods for, helping clients: where certain schools of family therapy may promote therapists’ constructing particular “narrative possibilities” (Kogan 1998:239) by negotiating with clients’ alternative version of the trouble, the counselors in our data worked to identify client-initiated ways of approaching the problem.

This raises the more general issue of how membership categorization—a generic feature of social interaction—is engaged to accomplish the work of a profession. Several decades ago, Atkinson (1980) adroitly linked the everyday notions of a “natural lifetime” to psychoanalytic practice. He argued that:

What members treat as a “natural lifetime” and which constitutes a presupposed normative order is used as a schema of interpretation whereby the propriety or impropriety of particular attitudes and behaviours is decided. The psychoanalyst achieves his professionally defensible diagnoses and recognizes his therapeutic successes through a notion of category-adequate behaviours. (Atkinson 1980:45)

In this article, we have examined the mutually monitored and coordinated use of such natural lifetime schemes, observable through the participants’ “methodic selection of “lifetime”
categories” (Atkinson 1980:45). Essentially, our analysis shows how clients and counselors draw on cultural resources to accomplish a variety of actions such as trouble telling or displaying understanding of (even affiliating with) the client’s situation. For both parties, this involves making the “right” inferences not by merely activating conventional meanings—e.g., concerning the relationships and responsibilities among family members, or a host of behaviors (category-bound activities), preferences (category predicates) or other features generated through SOL categories—but by recognizing in situ the relevance and upshot of this knowledge to the task at hand.

By explicating how cultural resources are relevantly occasioned by parties to KHL counseling sessions, this article contributes to a larger body of work on MCA in institutional interaction (Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Cromdal and Osvaldsson 2012; Hester and Francis 2000a, 2000b; Watson 2000). It shows how participants orient their conduct to, and thereby co-produce, the institutional context of this counseling service. That is to say, our demonstration of membership categories being deployed, received, and unpacked in building and receiving clients’ complaints and in co-assembling possible solutions in a way that highlights the clients’ agency and self-directedness, has explicated the practices by which the organizationally sanctionable features of KHL counseling are wrought out in situ. In this way, we have sought to identify and retain features of “unique adequacy” (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992) of this particular counseling practice.

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