Article

Somewhere to turn to[1]: Signposting in service provision

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Abstract

This article investigates how members of the public are guided or 'signposted' out of organisations that they have contacted to third-party agencies. Using conversation analysis, we examine the interactional practices professionals use to signpost callers to external organisations when their concerns do not fit within the remit of the present service. Drawing on a corpus of over 500 calls and meetings at five different institutions in the UK (including mediation services, local council organisations, a housing charity and a politician's constituency office), we show how the practice of signposting is intertwined with the activities of *rejecting* the caller's case for receiving service, while simultaneously *offering* a service – namely, a redirection to an ostensibly more appropriate service provider. We show how community problems can be treated as warranting assistance along a range of offer-ability (e.g. 'I will do X for you', 'That's the kind of thing we could do', 'Do you want their number?'), and how troubles-tellings without a specific request can be retroactively formulated into an actionable item for an institution. Our findings demonstrate practices for negotiating institutionality itself, through delimiting service remit, and through participants' orientations to the relevance of service provision as an institutional goal.

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"I wanted advice—not getting any. Passed from pillar to post."

('Vera'; Dale, 2004: 144)

Introduction

When contacting organisations for help, omnipresent are participants' orientations to institutional goals within these services (Drew and Heritage, 1992); participants organize their actions in ways that (re)index the institution's ostensible activities. Troubles are reported in the service of aid being offered by professionals, which are subsequently accepted (or not) by clients. Likewise, professionals are tasked with establishing whether assistance can be granted, by asking diagnostic questions as to the nature of the client's trouble. In this way, the goal orientations of participants are constitutive of call outcomes, through the shared coordination and mutual relevance of talk (Robinson, 2014). Members are part of a joint project in which activities are organised, invoked, and oriented to, which can be revealed through the initiation, projectability, and potential completion of a particular interactional endeavour (Raymond and Zimmerman, 2016).

In this article, we show how people's everyday concerns (e.g. noisy neighbours, planning rights, discarded rubbish) are fielded, and interactionally addressed, by organisations in the UK. Sometimes these concerns are deemed not to be within the remit of the organisation being contacted, leading to members of the public being directed or 'signposted' to third-party agencies that are ostensibly better placed to resolve their issues. We illustrate the ways in which professionals in mediation, environmental health, antisocial behaviour services, and a Member of Parliament's (MP) constituency office, signpost people to third-party agencies (TPAs), as displayed through the interactional resources available to participants. We reveal, through the practice of signposting, how assistance is offered in ways that can reshape the institutional and interactional trajectory for the provision of service in these encounters, primarily through directing callers to other institutions. Below, we define and situate the practice of signposting within related empirical research.

Signposting

Signposting is a practice in which TPAs are invoked by professionals as part of redirecting clients to other services, and, by implication, signposting is bound up with *not* granting aid by organisations that members of the public are currently in contact with. As a verb, 'to signpost' is colloquially defined as 'to point the way, provide direction, guide' (*The Free Dictionary*, 2018).[2] As an action occurring in institutional environments, a contrast can be made with the similar action of being *referred*[3] *to* TPAs – for instance, 'the council has just gimme this nu:mber?' (Alexander, 2018: 129). The difference being that the practice of signposting is designed as a consequence of rejecting the client's case for assistance, rather than a redirection on the basis of *gatekeeping*[4] (e.g., a family doctor referring to a medical specialist) or getting the right department (e.g., a switchboard). We examine how people seeking help are steered to another organisation, in the face of their problem not being resolved in the present one; in so doing, revealing how the practice of signposting reshapes future analytic trajectories (e.g. rejection and its acceptance or resistance).

Further, there is a unique opportunity to extend our knowledge of how utterances can project a future course of action (such as, proposing that the caller contact a TPA).

Previous conversation analytic (CA) research on the topic of signposting appears to be minimal at best; the focus has been on referrals or on accepting/rejecting service requests. This may be due in large part to the types of institutional domains that have attracted CA attention, which arguably inhibit the activity of signposting for those seeking assistance – for instance, calls to emergency services are typically accountable for immediate service, or rejection of it (e.g. Kevoe-Feldman and Pomerantz, 2018; Meehan, 1989; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1990), and medical encounters accountably involve providing treatments or further diagnostic testing (e.g. Elsey et al., 2015; Heritage and Robinson, 2006; Stivers, 2005). We are not suggesting that signposting out of these services does not occur, only that it has not been the focus of analysis. In the data corpora in this paper (see Data and Method section), signposting is a somewhat common practice. In fact, these services often cross-refer and signpost to each other as ways of managing similar community concerns (Alexander, 2018), reinforcing Torode's (2005) suggestion that non-emergency helplines often face unique challenges related to remit (p. 258).

There are studies which discuss steering people to other services although not as a systematic practice, such as with child protection helpline interactions (e.g. Hepburn, 2004; Potter and Hepburn, 2003), medical interactions (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Stivers, 2007) and meetings between teachers and educational psychologists (e.g. Hester, 1998). For instance, child protection officers (CPOs) work to establish whether there is evidence to justify referring concerned neighbours' reports to other services for legal action (Potter and Hepburn, 2003). As another example, Hester (1998) investigates how teachers categorise their pupils' behaviour as 'deviant' in interactions with educational psychologists, in the service of getting pupils with special needs referred for further assistance or intervention. However, these actions are treated differently than the *signposting* in our dataset; in each case above, the referring professionals act as gatekeeper for access to particular TPAs (from child protection services to social services, or from school to psychological intervention services). The above professionals orient to whether there is sufficient evidence in a given case to warrant referral, which is the central institutional activity of the discussions occurring.

In contrast, the service professionals in our dataset orient to whether there is evidence that the case fits the current institution at all, and the signposting is oriented to as an alternative, rather than a goal. Furthermore, teachers and concerned neighbours are not made accountable for contacting a psychologist or child protection helpline, as it is treated as the expected and appropriate path for getting appropriate help. The callers in our corpus, however, *are* made accountable for having contacted the institution (e.g. by asking 'who sent you to us'). This contrast highlights the way that certain pathways for interacting with multiple institutions are treated as expected, appropriate, and perhaps even unavoidable. Meanwhile, other pathways are treated as accountably inappropriate, and the caller is thus *signposted* to the appropriate institution to pursue their action, if they choose to do so. To our knowledge, little research has examined how these different actions are accomplished, let alone how multiple agencies are coordinated and explained in single interactions. Focusing on signposting in these organisations provides a unique

research opportunity – not only in terms of examining the ways in which service-to-service signposting is formulated by call-takers, but also, how signposting, as an interactional activity, compares across institutional domains.

Even though service representatives often have flexibility in establishing what issues are actionable or serviceable (Firth et al., 2005), rejections of cases or requests are sometimes enacted by professionals (especially from public organisations) as part of delimiting their service remit (e.g. Lee, 2011; Schegloff, 1988). As we will show below, even stating the service remit can amount to rejecting a case (similar to stating minimum acceptance criteria to applicants, see Hoey and Stokoe, 2018), making it an organisation's guidelines and responsibilities an interactionally delicate matter to manage. Signposting a case to another service is one way to *mitigate* the rejection-laden trajectory of dealing with service remit. Significantly, this sense of alleviating others' concerns through other actions are relevant to Maynard's body of work on the delivery of bad news (e.g. Maynard, 1997, 1998, 2003). When transitioning from bad news, speakers offer a solution for troubles tellers through what Maynard calls 'good news exits' and specifically that 'the proposal of remedy and it's acknowledgment permit movement away from the news, such as the shift to a closing of the conversation' (Maynard, 2003: 177). In our signposting corpus, service users are aligned to the professional's project of manoeuvring them (both institutionally and interactionally) through the current organisation, and so signposting can be seen as a way of managing delicate and moral matters of disruption in everyday life. Below, we identify how members of the public are signposted to TPAs, and how signposting becomes relevant in interaction. First, however, we briefly summarise our dataset, institutional remits, and method of analysis.

Data and method

The researchers transcribed a collection of over 500 recordings of telephone calls and meetings between members of the public and mediation services, local council, a housing charity and a politician's constituency office. From the dataset, we identified 18 meetings and calls in which professionals directed or guided people to TPAs (e.g. 'you could speak to the cleaning department' or 'I wonder if Citizen's Advice Bureau would be able to help') in line with the definition of signposting above. Part of the dataset (over 340 recordings of calls to mediation, environmental health, and antisocial behaviour services) were originally collected in 2006 for a British research council-funded project on neighbour disputes[5] (comparatively analysed in a dissertation; see Alexander, 2018). Although, these services provide assistance with similar kinds of neighbourhood problems (e.g. noise, smells, rubbish, property access), their remits vary. Antisocial behaviour services routinely work closely with the police and have certain enforcement powers, such as issuing antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs). Environmental health services ask callers to keep a diary so that neighbour problems can be monitored, and alert neighbours that a complaint has been made. Mediation services are commonly charitable organisations and encourage disputing neighbours to meet with meditators to negotiate and agree a way forward that satisfies both parties. Data from the housing and homelessness charity was collected in 2019 as part of a

British research council-funded Fellowship.[6] The corpora consisted of 82 recordings of telephone calls from members of the public who are in immediate need of somewhere to stay, and a helpline. The charity provides legal and housing advice, as well as contact details of other organisations. The constituency office data was collected as part of a dissertation investigating talk between politicians, their staff, and everyday citizens (25 meetings, 58 phone calls) (Hofstetter, 2016). Although follow-up discussions concerning cases previously signposted to TPAs were common, the data for this study focused on cases of new signposting actions.

All participants consented to have their calls and meetings recorded for research purposes, and all names and other identifying features of the recordings were anonymised. The data were transcribed using the Jefferson (2004) system of transcription, which includes information about the delivery of speech, such as its pacing, overlapping talk, and intonation. The collection was analysed using CA (Sacks, 1992; Sacks et al., 1974). CA examines how one speaker's turn builds on that of another through action, turn design, and sequential structure (Drew, 2013; Drew and Heritage, 1992). We analysed the overall structure of sequences in which signposting was formulated, their constituent actions and patterns in turn design (how a turn of talk was designed to do something), turn taking (who spoke when), action formation (how actions were formed within and across turns of talk), and sequence organisation (how actions were organised in a sequence) (Levinson, 2014; Schegloff, 2007).

Analysis

We show eight cases from our dataset which illustrate how the practice of signposting can be designed to reject the case for assistance whilst concurrently displaying action-ability and, in some instances, an offer of alternative help. We will first show how signposting is made relevant, namely in a context of rejection, and how professionals use accounts of remit to justify their inability to offer assistance. We will then demonstrate how signposting helps reduce resistance to rejection, which is a central claim of this article.

In the course of presenting a case, callers or visitors to a service present evidence for their need of assistance, incrementally designing their problem description, where possible, in a way that increases the relevance of an assisting response (Hofstetter and Stokoe, 2018). Responsive actions by professionals (e.g. alternative trajectories of service) do not necessarily come after initial presentation, but nor do they necessarily wait for a diagnostic questioning phase to be concluded (Robinson, 2014). In examples from our signposting corpus, the evidence presented for the case is treated by the call taker as indicative that the problem is outside the service remit of the institution. In explaining that the case is not actionable by the call taker's service, the call taker inevitably projects rejection of assistance. Below, the first extract shows a particularly quick transition from presenting the problem to claiming the problem is outside the institutional remit. The caller (C) reports finding syringes in their allotment garden shed, and the call taker shortly thereafter claims it is not something that environmental health services (E) would deal with (line 11). This is immediately followed with a signposting suggestion to speak to another department (line 12).

Extract 1: EH-106

```
01 C:  H:i y:es.=um:, mcht .hh I was advised to get in touch
02     with you.=We've got a: a sh:ed on an allotment and um:
03     (.) we belie:ve there are needles in it.=Syringes.
04          (0.8)
05 E:  #O#↑:h:.
06          (0.3)
07 E:  Oh: righ:t.=.hHH wu[l:,
08 C:                     [I I d- I mean I couldn't (.) I am
09     <tol:d this, I have not opened the door: and gone in
10     m[yself.( )
11 E:   [Wu:ll it's not something that I would ↑deal with:.=I
12     mean: .hHH uh you could speak to clean:sing department¿
13          (0.2)
14 E:  W:e're an enforcement um:: .hh section here.
15          (0.5)
16 E:  In environmental health.=So we enf:-
17     [we     do    enforcement.
18 C:  [Righ:t.=>So the< p'lice said to speak to environmental
19     health.=
20 E:  =Yy:ea::h.=Whul↓ I th- think they'd've got it wrong,
21     .HH uh: could y'↑j'st hold on I'll just check w'a
22     colleague but .HH[h th's not something we would do=
23 C:                   [Okay,
```

It is projectable that there is already a problem, or at least something unusual, with C's telling from the call taker's response to the telling; '#O#:h' and 'Oh righ:t' (lines 5–7) are not typical responses to tellings on this helpline, and the subsequent 'wul' (line 7) projects a complication in the response (Heritage, 2015). The caller also orients to the projectable trouble by providing a repair of what she means about the syringes (lines 8–10). However, although the caller attempts to repair the details of her telling, it is the actionability of the telling that becomes clear as the trouble source in the ensuing sequence. The call taker rejects the case, claiming it is outside the remit of the service (line 11), and latches a suggestion of an alternate service to the rejection, which demonstrates a 'signposting' (lines 11–12). When the signposting does not receive a response (line 13), the call taker accounts for the inability to take action on the case by explaining the remit of the service (lines 14–16). The caller likewise accounts for having called, claiming to have been referred by the police (line 18), which is a way of doing 'active resistance' (i.e. non-alignment with E, but also the initiation of a new sequence challenging E's grounds for rejection) (Stivers, 2005). The call taker offers to check (line 21) but reiterates their claim that the case is not 'something we would do' at the service (line 22).

The call taker's response interweaves a rejection, the description of the service remit, and the signposting. The remit and rejection are mutually constituted; by describing the remit as not covering the caller's case, the call taker also achieves rejection of that case. The institutional remit is oriented to as the ultimate arbiter of whether something is serviceable. Similarly, remit is used as an account for calling, namely that another authority (a TPA, in this case the police) claimed that the service remit for environmental health would cover the caller's problem. Signposting is also interwoven, however. The call

taker latches an insert repair to the rejection (line 11–12), proposing an alternative service before the caller has an opportunity to respond to the rejection. It is also clear in this case the way that these institutions may pass cases between them until an institutional representative treats the case as appropriate and within the remit, because the caller reports having been signposted *already* to environmental health, thus resisting being signposted again to some other institution.

Extract 2 shows a similar category-based exclusion of the caller's case. In Extract 2, C has called a mediation service (M) regarding a jointly owned fence between two properties.

Extract 2: DC-78

```
01  M:  Yeh th- the mediation service: .hhh (.) is here: to:
02      help people (.) resolve disputes.=.hh That they ↑have
03      with their neighbours so it may #ugh:# y'know it maybe
04      that your .HH situation isn't actually a dis:pute.=.hh
05      um: but that you want some information.
06  C:  I do.=.hh [Mainly I want some information on- on um=
07  M:            [Yeah.
08  C:  =how high somebody can build .hh um a shared boundary
09      fence.
10  M:  ↑UMm:. an- and um who who: (0.2) <can I as:k how you:
11      .hH came to be in contact with our service¿
12  C:  Um: because you're in thee: um: (0.2) Newtown book.
13  M:  Mcht [righ:t,
14  C:       [Directory of council service[es.
15  M:                                     [↑Oh↓: okay.=.HHh
16      (0.2) coz we're not a part of the council.=[.hh uh=
17  C:                                              [Right.
18  M:  we're not actually a- uhm: a council service.=But=
19      we're an as I said we're an independent organisation
20      that's here to help neighbours .HHh when there are
21      disputes.=.HH ↑Um:: .HH have you tried any other:
22      parts of the council.
23          (0.4)
24  C:  Ah no. because I don't know where to look.
25  M:  N:o.=.HH uhm (0.2) I- I thin:k .hhhh #ugh# th't- you
26      m:ay get the information you:: require from (.)
27      environment services,
28  C:  °Environ[ment (services)°
29  M:          [Which is: depar- it's- it's a council
30      department, coun- um: department of New District, .hHHH
31      um:: (1.3) they may have (.) the information that you
32      require.
```

M explains the remit of the mediation service as an institution that helps people 'resolve disputes' (line 2), and contrasts this with C's case, 'your:HH situation isn't actually a dis:pute' (line 4). C is looking for information, which C confirms, and this categorically excludes their case from being serviceable by the mediation service. M further excludes mediation from being a part of C's anticipated service category (line 14) by virtue of not

being a part of the council (line 16). The explanation informs C but also rejects their case, and accounts for doing the rejection and failing to offer service. However, M appends a signposting to the explanation, initially enquiring if C has managed to get service elsewhere (lines 21–22), which, following C's admission of a lack of knowledge about where to turn to for help (line 24), serves to frame the suggestion of a potential candidate service (lines 25–27) that fits the categories that C's case requires. M's signposting turn design includes the same categories that were previously a basis for rejection, such as 'information' (lines 26, 31) and 'it's a council department' (lines 29–30), which tailors the signposting to C's case (i.e. being guided to an appropriate source of information). In this way, M provides *some* service to C, in the form of signposting, which further mitigates the accountability of rejecting the case.

Signposting appears to be designed to reduce clients' resistance to not receiving the service they have contacted organisations for, which is borne out in our dataset. However, not all signposting actions are accepted by the callers or visitors. In Extract 3, C resists and rejects the option to call a TPA. The caseworker (CW) at this constituency office claims not to be able to provide answers to C's questions due to lack of expertise, and contrasts this institutional inability to provide aid with her personal 'gut feel' (line 11) that C's problem of an ex-husband threatening to sue for their house will probably not go to court.

Extract 3: MP_131111-05

```
01  C:  [I mean we're g]oing back a lot of ↑years,
02      [(aren't we)]
03  CW: [Ye::s,    ] Yeah:. It's just that this is- I haven't
04      got any experti:se in this area.=I wonder if Citizen's
05      Advice Bureau would be able to help you .h[hh
06  C:                                          [Well I- (0.6)
07      I mean- I- bt- hhh (0.4) I ↓don't ↓know whether it's all
08      hot air anyway.
09          (1.4)
10  CW: Yeah but they might be able to tell ya.=I mean it doesn't
11      s- .hHH (0.8) My <gut feel is,> (0.3) that you're fi:ne,
12      if it was- if the- (.) HOUse was signed over to you in the:
13      .hh original divorce but I don't- I honestly <<do not know.>>
14      .hhh So:, it might be worth, just having- just a ↑phone call
15      with Citizen's Advice Bureau just to sound them ou:t,
16          (0.7)
17  C:  Mm[:,
18  CW:   [D'you want their number,
19          (0.7)
20  C:  No I've got tha:t.
```

CW excludes being able to offer proper advice to C due to lack of expertise (lines 3–4) but latches an additional suggestion to signpost C to Citizen's Advice Bureau, a TPA (lines 4–5). C resists this suggestion on the basis that such additional help may not be necessary since the threat to sue may be 'all hot air' (lines 6–8). CW further pursues the TPA as a better option (lines 10–15), providing rationales: they might know whether it is

hot air (line 10), CW can only provide a personal, non-institutional 'gut feel' (line 11) that C will be okay, CW does not herself know (line 13), and finally CW minimizes the effort of just having a preliminary phone call with the TPA (lines 14-15). After a lack of response from C (line 16), the unmarked acknowledgement token 'Mm:', (line 17), CW pursues by offering to provide the TPA's number, which is rejected (lines 18–20).

C is unusually able to outright reject CW's signposting because C *already* has access to the TPA in question through having their number. The silence (line 16) and minimal acknowledgement (line 17) are similar to how patients resist treatment recommendations (e.g. Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Koenig, 2011; Stivers, 2005), while the claim to already have the number is similar to avowals of prior self-help (Edwards and Stokoe, 2007). These practices orient to the projected work CW is suggesting C undertake, and invalidate the proposal on the basis of already undertaking (or at least being able to undertake) such steps. The extract shows further evidence that even signposting is an accountable action, in lieu of offering service. The extract also demonstrates other ways that call takers can exclude a case from remit; instead of placing the case outside of the category of remit of the institution, CW claims her own insufficient 'expertise' (line 4) to manage the case adequately.

A similar issue of expertise can be seen in Extract 4. C is calling an environmental health service with privacy concerns relating to a neighbour who has installed a CCTV camera which overlooks C's property, seeking to know their legal rights.

Extract 4: EH-103

```
01   C:   Um:, (0.4) I've h↑ad a word with the p'lice about it,
02        (0.3) mcht .h and they said th've (.) spoken to him an'
03        he assures them that it's not seeing into my (0.3)
04        house or bedroom, .h b[ut y'know th- nobody's seen it=
05   E:                        [Mm,
06   C:   =of course but I didn't know whether there w- (.)
07        y'know it was allowed to be put in a position where you
08        see it from (0.2) y'[know (0.2) your (.) lounge.
09   E:                      [HHHhhh    Tsk
10        (1.0)
11   E:   .hhh[h AHh:. not sure that's something that we would=
12   C:       [(                                            )
13   E:   =↑deal with but certainly I'll .hH pass it on to one of
14        our officers but I'm not sure th't it comes within our
15        r[em↑i:t so .hHH it's a bit of a do↑dgy one that o n e.
16   C:    [Right (                                ) I know.

           ((8 lines omitted; C discusses solicitor))

25   E:   <Wull leave ↑it with me anyway but (.) as I s[ay: uh=
26   C:                                                [Yeh.
27   E:   =Are you still in: .Hh <touch with your solicitor.
28        (.)
29   E:   Did you say you're gonna see he[r this afternoon.
30   C:                                  [I r e a l l y
31        h:opefully this wee:k.=
```

```
32  E:  Ah: right.=Wull ah: a- (0.2) [th:at's something yer=
33  C:                              [(No:.)
34  E:  =need to talk to him ↑about r[eally,
35  C:                               [Right.
```

C reports the self-help (Edwards and Stokoe, 2007) he has accomplished before calling, but displays uncertainty relating to the neighbour's rights (lines 6-8). E gives a delayed (lines 9–11) response that he is uncertain if environmental health would do within its remit (lines 11–15). E offers to pass it on to an officer (lines 13–14), which would constitute service, but warns explicitly that it may not be within the institutional remit (lines 14–15). E leaves unstated what the consequences for not being within remit would mean for the officer's actions. Later in the call, E similarly offers that C 'leave it with me' (line 25), a non-specific offer to do something unnamed with the case. E suggests that C contact their solicitor in the omitted lines and pursues that suggestion towards the end of the call (lines 27–34). In contrast to the offers of service to 'pass it on' (line 13) and 'leave it with me anyway' (line 25), which do not formulate a specific service, E more strongly suggests C 'need's to talk to the solicitor (line 34). Throughout, E hedges about the environmental service's ability to take action on the case, saying they are 'not sure' it is within the remit (lines 11, 14), that the situation is 'dodgy' (line 15), and citing a TPA that would have more authority as an alternate option.

The signposting is accomplished over a specific sequence. First, the service inquiry is made evident, usually by the client but sometimes reformulated by the service provider (see Extracts 2, 6, 7). Once an actionable inquiry is made available, the service providers withhold and reject making offers of aid by stating the service does not 'deal with' or cover the case in question. In delimiting the remit of the service, service providers can categorically exclude the case from being actionable by the service (e.g. Extract 1 and 2), and/or they can claim a lack of ability or skill to deal with the case (Extract 3). In doing these explanations, the service providers account for their inability to act, while simultaneously accomplishing the rejection itself. Since rejection is projectable and evident from the service delimitation, resistance may be expected (and is regularly given), but these rejection turns are designed to also project a potential alternate action. These signposting components are designed to tie the signposting action to the rejection in a way that minimises resistance. For instance, signposting turns often do not allow space for the caller to respond (and thus no opportunity to object) and latch the signposting utterance to the rejection utterance (Extracts 1, 3; see also a similar practice in Hepburn and Potter, 2011). Other methods include syntactically connecting the signposting utterance (using 'but' or 'so', Extracts 3, 4), and using category alternatives (Extract 1, 2). These strategies hold the call open in the face of rejection and make the alternate action available for the caller or visitor to respond to.

Service providers also use different pronouns when signposting, typically using the institutional 'we' to exclude possible action, and the personal 'I' to suggest alternate options. The latter is more consistent across the data, as the first-person pronoun is also sometimes used in the initial rejections and exclusions. Where this occurs, though, the service provider may especially familiar with the client (Extract 3), may reformulate to use 'we' (Extract 1), and/or may consult with a colleague in a display of institutional consensus (again Extract 1). In signposting, however, 'I' phrases are more common (see

Extracts 2–8). 'I' forms a category contrast with 'we', displaying an individual's per-spective rather than an institution's, and thus highlights both that the proposal goes beyond the service (the service provider could have solely refused and attempted clos-ing) as well as the unofficial nature of the advice (it *might* help to go to a TPA).

The next examples in our dataset expand this analysis of different design elements for signposting, contrasting a rejection with no signposting to signposting (where the client must take action), and offering (where the action is done fully on behalf of the client). Extract 5 is from a call to a housing charity (CT) and demonstrates how a rejection of the case for assistance can sometimes lead to no signposting by the organisation being contacted.

Extract 5: H-02

```
01  C:   I need I <need advice on what to do.>=Because the [council=
02  CT:                                                        [Okay.
03  C:   =aren't giving us advice on what to do:, they just tell us
04       to go ho:meless an' that's what I'm goin' t' ↑do.=But then
05       I've got nowhere else to ↑go.
06           (0.5)
07  C:   The[y told me to get in touch with HomeHelp to ask for=
08  CT:      [(         )
09  C:   =help.
10           (0.5)
11  CT:  .hhh Well we don't pro[vide accommodation as you know that.
12  C:                         [An' I need-
13           (0.2)
14  CT:  Okay yeah, you are aware of that aren't yer.
15            (0.7)
16  C:   YES: I just- I need ad[vice on what to do.
17  CT:                         [(Right.)
```

The caller issues a high-entitlement 'I need X' request for information, which is framed as a consequence of not receiving appropriate information from the council (lines 1, 3). Accountability for calling this service is managed through C's display of willingness to resolve their situation (going 'homeless' – line 4) even if the consequences of the advice are unreasonable (having nowhere to go – line 5) Following no uptake by CT (line 6), C shifts the burden of responsibility for managing the problem onto the service by explicitly marking out that he has been referred to this organisation, with information-seeking now transformed into help-seeking, projecting greater urgency (lines 7, 9). After a gap of silence which foreshadows potential trouble (line 10), CT produces a rejection which not only orients to C's problem being one that falls outside the service's remit, but signifi-cantly, proposes that C is already aware of this, with the implication that C has contacted the service with this knowledge, and is being made accountable on that basis (line 11). In contrast to the cases above, a signposting is not produced; instead, CT reinforces the reject-ability of C's concern by reformulating what should already be knowable to C (line 14). Following a potentially problematic gap of silence (line 15) C confirms his knowl-edge about service remit and reissues the earlier request in line 1 of 'needing advice' (line 16). As with other institutions contacted in our dataset, it is clear that establishing grounds

for the provision of service is negotiated between caller and call-taker (C does eventually receive information on his housing options later in the call) when pursuing the case for aid (Alexander, 2018; Alexander and Stokoe, 2019; Hofstetter and Stokoe, 2018).

Extract 6 is from a call to a mediation service, in which C is complaining about a neighbour drilling holes in an adjoining wall. In contrast to Extracts 1, 2 and 3, no offer is made but instead the organisation's remit is outlined by the call-taker (like Extract 2).

Extract 6: EC-22

```
01  M:  Y:ea:h.=So you're wanting to know really what your:
02      l:egal posi[tion is at the moment about (0.2) uh: uh:=
03  C:             [↑Mm↓:.=Hh
04  M:  =d- drilling w- holes in your fen:ce 'n an putting:
05      l:ights u[p the top, .hhh y:ea:h.=O:kay.=.hH um: mcht=
06  C:          [Y:eah.
07  M:  =.hH #uh# <p'↑haps shall I briefly explain what we are
08      coz: I may- #ump# <prob'ly need to:: suggest >that you<
09      contact someone e:l[se.=.hh Um: mcht .hh cau- we're=
10  C:                     [Y:eah,=
11  M:  =we're basically a mediation service s[o .hh what we=
12  C:                                        [Mm:,
13  M:  =<try to help with is: um: mcht .hh try t' help with
14      thee: .hh (0.2) th- the situation where neighbours have
15      a disagreement in terms of helping them t' (0.3) <talk
16      about th' problem an[d to find a way forward.=.hHH=
17  C:                      [Mm:,
18  M:  =But we're not actually: a kind of advice or
19      enforcement service.
20  C:  Yeah I see, y[eh.=Hh
21  M:               [So mcht .Hh did you hear about us from
22      the council.=Was th[at uh
23  C:                     [Yeah she put y- #me# onto y' yeah.
24  M:  ↑O:↓kay, yeah fine fine, .hH um: (0.4) mcht so .hh if
25      you wanted us to- (0.2) sort 've contact your neighbour
26      'n talk about the situation 'n try 'n maybe arrange a
27      joint meeting that's the kind of thing we
28      c[ould do.
```

Following an upshot of C's neighbourhood concern (lines 1–5), M proposes to summarise the service's remit (line 7), which serves to project a rejection of the case for assistance and for C to be signposted to another service (lines 8–9). Note also the turn delivery (perturbation, cut-offs) which may indicate M's non-granting of aid as problematic. As with Extract 2, the call-taker explains the remit of the service (lines 9, 11, 13–16). Following this, an negatively designed rejection component (see Deppermann and De Stefani, 2019) is produced (lines 18–19) which builds on M's previous upshot regarding C's legal position, going further in terms of legality, to what may be legally enforceable – in so doing, neatly marking out the contrast between what is offerable by M, and what is required by C. Up until then, no explicit offer of assistance is produced. Instead, M designs what aid is retroactively grantable within the service's remit; in so doing, leaving it to the caller decide next steps in resolving the neighbour problem. The mediator uses

an explanation of the service (line 7–19) as part of accounting for its remit and projecting what kinds of actions will be offerable. Signposting is regularly bound up with this kind of 'educational' work.

Extract 7 is similar to Extract 6 in that the service professional does engage with alternative organisations as an option for C. Here, a constituent is visiting their Member of Parliament (MP) to whistle-blow about a law firm that has been engaged in illegal actions and mishandling his daughter's case.

Extract 7: MP_131129_02

```
01  MP:   ↑SO WHAt ↑YOU're REAlly asking me,=You want to make a
02        complaint about this FIR:m, (0.2) An' the way they've
03        conducted matt[ers.
04  C:                  [((clears throat)) (0.2) Well, I've come
05        to see ↓you, (0.4) because, I want, (.) I wan- I want to
06        bring this to li:ght.
07            (.)
08  MP:   Well, (.) I thInk the [BEst way to do that,=
09  C:                          [To,
10  MP:   =Is to- is to- tuh-=is to:, there is a, (0.3) a
11        complaints proced[ure,
12  C:                    [Yeah.=I know [th- we-
13  MP:                                 [The legal ombudsman,
14  C:    Yeah. (0.2) She- (.) Well what- (.) What they've advised
15        me daughter to do is WRI:te (.) to the comp'ny. (0.3)
16        Complain[ing.
17  MP:          [Yeah.
18            (0.7)
19  C:    An' then,
20  MP:   Well you star:t ther:e, th[e-
21  C:                              [Uh::
22            (1.2)
23  MP:   There's a >solicitors regulatory authority,<
            ((begins to explain process))
```

The MP transforms C's prior explanation of the problem (not shown) into an actionable request (lines 1-3). This reformulation is treated as insufficient by C, who describes the issue again, removing the element of making a complaint, and highlighting the whistle-blowing nature of his service seeking visit (lines 4-6). The MP accepts his reformulation, but pursues the same line of action, targeting the next utterance as 'the best way' to address C's issue (line 8), before introducing the complaints procedure. C claims to know of this procedure (line 12) and to have already been advised to write to the law firm to begin the complaints procedure (lines 14–16). However, this is not the full procedure—he is only to 'star:t ther:e' (line 20)—and the MP begins to explain the remaining part of the complaint process. In a similar way to Extract 6, the MP pursues a specific actionable route, not engaging with alternatives. Yet, in this case the MP does not allow C an interactional slot to decide on the route out to a TPA (which may be one way to manage resistance).

It later turns out that C has visited the constituency office precisely because the complaints procedure (which begins with a letter to the very company that has acted

poorly to his daughter) seemed, to C, to be insufficient or flawed. The MP, as a recipient of the complaint, but as a service provider who cannot actually initiate or organise the complaint itself, becomes a mediator between C and the complaints process. The MP provides an educating role, circumscribing both the boundaries of their own service as well as that of the legal complaints procedure. Clients anticipate that a reformulation of the request projects an alteration of the service sought, because it is not a fitted answer to a service request (compliance or offering the matching action would be fitted). However, the service professional enacts being constrained by institutional policy, and thus they require an account for altering or denying the service. Such an account can take an educational, explanatory format, reinforcing the service professional's rights to delimit the service's actionable options, and the client's constraint to deal with what is actionable.

In our final case, a caller is contacting an antisocial behaviour service (A) to report noisy neighbours. The signposting in Extract 8 is distinct in that the caller's agency to decide a future course of action is substantively moderated by the call-taker.

Extract 8: AC-17

```
01  A:  R:ight okay.=So y- as yet you haven't he[ard from=
02  C:                                          [No::.
03  A:  =the l[ocal beat officer.= <↑Have you left any:=
04  C:        [No:.
05  A:  =.HHh ((clears throat)) or have you made any complaints
06      to environmental health in respect of the
07      nui[sance noi:se.=.hhh Okay, th- th- th:ey would=
08  C:     [N:o:.
09  A:  =be your f:irst points of ca:ll really.=Tha- that
10      complaint of nuisance noise n:eeds to be directed to
11      the environmental health.=.HHh um office which I will
12      do on your beh:alf:, [.hh but they probably want to Hh=
13  C:                       [Y:eah,
14  A:  =contact you an' take some further infor[mation f:rom=
15  C:                                          [Yeah,
16  A:  =you.
```

As C comes to the conclusion of the problem description, A begins to ask about how other TPAs may be involved, including the local police officer (line 3) and the potential to call environmental health (another service, lines 5–7). The signposting is fully deployed at lines 7–11, where A states that environmental health 'would be your first points of call' (lines 7–9). This first signposting is formatted as explaining the typical or accountable form of action: the modal 'would' in particular portrays calling environmental health as the appropriate course of action in such cases. The next utterance upgrades the signposting to environmental health as an action that is necessary ('needs', line 10). Finally, A announces (lines 11–12) that they will do this action for the caller (an announcement offer, Hofstetter and Stokoe, 2015). Together, these linguistic components reject assisting C by dealing with the noise complaint and transform the requested service into an alternative. A latches all their utterances together (lines 7, 9, 11), throughout the signposting, which does not give C any opportunity to resist; A even takes a breath mid-TCU

(line 11), removing the possibility of C taking a turn in that break. Likewise, the announcement offer does not orient to any contingency in C's accepting the offer. Further, it could be that by naming environmental health as a service C might have already contacted, is a device for framing a rejection of assistance, through marking out C as accountable for not contacting the service to which she is subsequently signposted.

The examples above show how signposting can be used as part of the accounting process for rejection and may be accomplished along a range of practices. Signposting may be stated as an alternative, but it may also be phrased as an offer of action from the service (and in the case of Extract 8, produced subsequently to signposting C to an alternative service). These elements are interwoven with the displays of resistance from callers, as well as with enacting the remit of the service.

Discussion

Through signposting, the service professional carefully navigates several issues in rejecting a request for service. First, in rejecting, the service professional accounts for giving a dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984); some account is necessary concerning why this is not the service the client is looking for. Signposting works as an account, while simultaneously indicating what the appropriate remit is for the institution they are representing (in other words, what remit they, the professional, will enact in that moment). Second, in accomplishing this 'educational' element, the service professional manages how accountable they should make the client. That is, on the one hand, the client is made accountable for having contacted the inappropriate institution. On the other, signposting mitigates that accountability on the client's behalf, in displaying some understanding of how the misstep came about.

The third issue is the management of resistance. Signposting provides a space in which resistance can be anticipated and nullified, by delimiting with what the current institution will assist. The service professional ultimately has rights to determine what the institution will cover (even in Extract 1, where the caller was referred to the service by another TPA). Furthermore, since signposting additionally creates an offer (of information, a recommendation, to contact a TPA, etc.), the client has a new and alternate means of acquiring assistance, even if it is minimal, which mitigates how much they can resist the rejection that is simultaneously occurring. Finally, although signposting may manage institutional remit, it also allows the service professional to display an individual willingness to offer assistance, which may help mitigate their personal accountability for rejection, and allow more of the accountability to lay with the institution and its policies, smoothing the dispreferred structure that rejection creates.

Our analysis demonstrates the interactional practices surrounding signposting - in particular, focusing on how signposting is typically preceded by a rejection on the basis of service remit, and how clients are given no opportunity to respond before a signposting option is delivered. Service providers thus anticipate and circumvent (at least temporarily) resistance. The resistance of professionals to provide a service is not frequently reported in interactional literature; past examinations of screening cases for eligibility have focused on resistance from callers, not call-takers (e.g. Drew and Walker, 2010; Hepburn and Potter, 2011; Heritage and Stivers, 1999). Previous studies on non-granting

of requests showed how customers' expectations can be shaped ahead of a rejection into a more 'grantable' request (Lee, 2011).

However, empirical research has, to date, not addressed the ways in which people are directed out of present organisations to TPAs. As an institutional practice, we propose that signposting can be seen as a way of 'gatekeeping' (see p. 5) and managing the institution as category rather than a way of 'controlling access' to the organisation itself (Erickson and Schultz, 1982). However, there may be other social practices contributing to the occurrence of signposting (as opposed to offering service, or indeed solely rejecting it) that we have not covered here; we have focused on describing the occurrence of signposting and its features. Future work could examine other practices that alter the trajectory of signposting, including the accomplishment of relevant social identity (see both Erickson and Schultz, 1982; Kitzinger and Mandelbaum, 2013), the relation of openings and other sequential elements to the eventual signposting action (see Robinson and Heritage, 2006), and of course the design of case making (see Alexander, 2018; Hofstetter and Stokoe, 2018).

We label the set of practices above as signposting, and we have argued that signposting defies categorisation as an offer or rejection, precisely because it is designed to do so. In this sense, it is a further action to be explored in its own right, as a 'praction' (see Schegloff, 1996). It is even a members' term at times (see sociological literature and reports discussing service remit, e.g. Dale, 2004; Stanley et al., 2010), and it can be accountable as undesirable in comparison to receiving service (see the epigraph). However, as Enfield and Sidnell (2017) discuss, what is critical for participants in the interactions is managing the unfolding sequence to provide appropriate responses. The service provider has to reject the client, a dispreferred action (Pomerantz, 1984) and accountable. What we describe as signposting, and what can become accountable and resist-able as signposting (e.g. when resisting being sent to another agency in Extract 1), is *emergent* from the management of local contingencies. Signposting provides an excellent example that precisely 'what we are doing' at any given moment is evolving sequentially, and subject to ongoing potential descriptions and accountabilities. What we have described is both a way to manage those ongoing accountabilities, and thus also something that can become accountable as a description of conduct.

More broadly, our findings show how professionals and members of the public work to establish what organisations can (or cannot) enact as service. Institutional remit is not only a matter for policy, but involves continual management from service providers, in negotiation with callers with active problems. In contrast to other types of agencies (e.g. emergency services) that have been more frequently studied in the past, mediation, environmental health, antisocial behaviour services, and MP's surgeries can and do signpost to each other, and appear to even have tacit remit boundary negotiations through caller's cases (e.g. Extract 1). Signposting is a local, interactional mechanism by which government policies and matters of service jurisdiction are trialled, negotiated, and contested. As such, it is a key element of institutional interaction that requires further study.

Funding

Notes

1. With gratitude to Sacks (1967)
2. Notably, this definition is from an online medical dictionary, rather than an arguably more commonly known and referenced one (e.g. online versions of the Oxford English Dictionary, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and the Collins Dictionary), wherein the verb 'to signpost' is given a more literal definition – for instance, indicating directions towards a particular landmark.
3. 'When someone (or something) is referred or directed for consultation, review, or further action' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2018)
4. Gatekeeping' is a process by which certain criteria must be met, in order for assistance to be warranted and offered, and is prevalent across many institutional settings – for instance, medical encounters (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Speer and Parsons, 2007), emergency service calls (e.g. Heritage and Clayman, 2010; Whalen et al., 1988; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1990), and in law courts (Solan, 2010).
5. Project title: 'Identities in neighbour discourse: Community, conflict and exclusion. ' ESRC funding award number: RES-148-25-0010.
6. Project title: 'The formulation and management of social problems in service provision' ESRC funding award number: ES/T008172/1.

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