

## **Self-Help in Calls for Help With Problem Neighbors**

*Derek Edwards and Elizabeth Stokoe*  
Department of Social Sciences  
Loughborough University

In telephone calls to United Kingdom mediation centers for disputing neighbors, participants deal with clients' prior efforts at resolving the problem. Where no such efforts are mentioned in initial complaint narratives, there follows a typical sequence of actions. On the evident completion of the complaint, mediators (M) ask whether efforts have been made to speak with the problem neighbor. Clients and M treat the question not only as information seeking but as normatively accountable, orienting to this by various kinds of "dispreference" marking, speech perturbation in M's question turn, and by the elicitation and provision of accounts. Accounts claim various kinds of inability, difficulty, strong probability of failure, or reasons to be fearful of the consequences. It is generally at this point that M provides a description of what the mediation service can offer given that mediation will involve precisely what the client has just accounted for as problematical—talking to the neighbor.

In this article, we examine how in calls to a mediation service for conflicting neighbors, participants attend to the normative relevance of clients having made some effort to resolve the problem themselves prior to seeking help. This belongs to a very general theme in help calls—reasons for needing or asking for help—and as such, it is generally addressed in the client's initial problem description, troubles telling, or complaint.

A general feature of service provision is what has been called in different contexts *counselability*, *doctorability*, *policeability*, and so on in which

it is established that a given problem is appropriate for whatever service is being called on (e.g., Edwards, 2001; Heritage & Robinson, 2006; Meehan, 1989; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990). The relevant concept here, the *mediatability* of a problem between neighbors, is not only an orientation to the normative requirements of the institutional setting. There is also a very basic, even more general phenomenon at work, which is managing the normative conditions for asking anyone for *help*. This will vary with the particular kinds of problems and services on offer ranging from medical ones; to emergency services; technical helplines; and personal matters such as feeling suicidal, seeking counseling, or needing help with a troublesome neighbor and the specifics of the actual problems. However, there is a particular accountability in asking for help in cases in which it is not immediately obvious that the requester is unable to solve the problem themselves, or, as Sacks (1972) noted, in which one is consulting strangers or experts on personal matters when one might be expected to turn first to friends and family. Needing medical attention, technical assistance, or reporting a police emergency are situations in which handling things oneself are often beyond a caller's competence or even ill advised. However, even in those cases, people may have to establish that they are ill enough to bother the doctor, or in enough danger, or in a clearly crime-relevant situation to warrant calling the police (Meehan, 1989; Sacks, 1992, p. 113 and forward).

However, even more, people can be expected to be able to sort out their own mundane, nontechnical problems in life such as feeling lonely or having relationship troubles or neighbor troubles—at least before those troubles are medicalized or legalized or technicalized in some way. In Sacks's (1972) pioneering work, having “no one to turn to” worked as a last-ditch, I-have-tried-everything account for calling a stranger and expert. Given that asking for help is an accountable matter, one account is that one cannot help oneself, or have tried and failed to help oneself, when helping oneself is a normatively expectable first thing to do. The proverb “God helps those who help themselves” is quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2002) in 1880 as already “an old saying” (see entry for *labour*, §2b). So even God may require it as a precondition; divine assistance is offered on the basis that one has made an effort to help oneself. Self-help arises in the data we examine here as a normative precondition for asking for help.<sup>1</sup>

Mediation is a growing industry in the United Kingdom, with over 150 centers that deal with neighborhood and other social problems (e.g., divorce, employment, and family mediation). It is a nonlegal process by which trained mediators, acting as neutral third parties, attempt to resolve

disputes between two or more parties and find a mutually acceptable solution. It is generally a more cost effective and speedier alternative to legal proceedings and aims to intervene in disputes before they escalate irrevocably. Centers are usually funded by local council authorities, often as part of a wider regeneration and renewal, social inclusion, or community-oriented governmental priorities (although some centers are dependent on charitable income for their funding). Most mediation centers produce leaflets advertising their services in local newspapers and at council offices, police stations, doctors' surgeries, and so on, and many have an Internet presence. However, it is clear from much of our data that callers have been referred to mediation by a local council housing officer, or by the police: that is, by some other third party whom they have contacted first to discuss their neighbor dispute. Mediators will sometimes make the first call to a potential client on the same basis—a police or housing officer might contact mediation centers to inform them of a dispute.

The mediation process generally starts with a telephone call in which members of the public contact their local mediation center and describe their problem. Calls typically last between 5 and 30 min, during which the mediator will establish whether or not the problem is “mediatable.” It is during these calls that mediators describe mediation as a no-blame, future-oriented process in which all the parties meet face to face, in the presence of the mediator, to have their version of events heard and to listen to others. Descriptions of mediation services often focus on their neutrality with regard to each disputing party and also emphasize their independence from local councils and the police to underscore this neutrality. Possible disjunctures can therefore arise between citizen expectations and what mediation actually offers as a service (see Tracy, 1997), with callers sometimes looking for direct action, intervention, or eviction of their neighbors and the call taker having to explain what the service provides. If, at the end of the call, the caller agrees to proceed, the mediator will then visit each party to conduct an individual interview before attempting to get all parties to meet together to discuss the situation.

Our empirical topic, then, is a specific instance of the normative status of self-help in requests for help in a set of telephone calls between mediation services and people calling to complain about their neighbors.<sup>2</sup> The phone calls are preliminary to a possible next step, of which many callers may be unaware, in which mediators go to people's homes, talk to them and their neighbors, and try to get the conflicting parties together to talk things through. We focus on a specific moment in many of the calls when the

mediator asks something like, “have you tried speaking to your neighbor about this?” We examine how self-help (speaking to the neighbor) features as a normative (if not actual) preliminary to asking for help, how the absence of such efforts is treated as accountable and accounted for, and how those accounts provide an opportunity for mediators to explain what the service offers.

We are not examining here the variety of calls in which the “help yourself” issue does not arise. Those are cases in which the initial problem description (a) includes an account of having tried to resolve the problem; (b) is not based on a request for help (typically a different kind of call, information seeking, arrangement making, follow-up, etc.); (c) identifies talking with the neighbor as itself the problem; or (d) includes a strong account of why talking it through would be inappropriate (although this may be challenged) based on severity, criminality, violence, or some other feature that elicits an alternative solution such as police intervention.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

We focus on a set of telephone calls between clients (C) and neighbor dispute mediators (M). Data are taken from a collection of approximately 400 anonymized telephone calls to three different mediation centers across the United Kingdom, each center having two or three different staff receiving calls.

In this analysis, we propose a general sequence of actions as follows, which we use as a broad framework for analyzing interactional practices:

1. C provides an initial problem description or complaint in which no prior efforts at self-help (e.g., speaking with the neighbor about it) have been mentioned.
2. M inquires about prior self-help.
3. C produces a negative response and account.
4. M outlines what the mediation service offers, or points C elsewhere.

In extract 1 the side arrows numbered 1 to 4 correspond to these four kinds of actions, with various subcomponents marked by lowercase letters as 1a, 2c, and so forth. The extract starts just after a standard ethical permission

sequence initiated by M, on behalf of the researchers (the authors of this article), near the start of the call.

(1) DC:71:42

- 1 M: Ri:ght.h So what's the main problem:.  
 2 (0.4)
- 3 C: 1a→ It's her noise.  
 4 (0.3)
- 5 M: Noi:s [e.  
 6 C: [Y[es,  
 7 M: [Ye:h o[ka:y, ]  
 8 C: 1b→ [It's e ]very single wee:kend.  
 9 >I mea[n< I wo ]rk permanent six two
- 10 M: [Uh hu:h]  
 11 (0.7)
- 12 M: Y[e:h  
 13 C: [on a mor:ning.  
 14 M: Yeh.  
 15 (0.3)
- 16 C: An' (0.4) she's coming home in early hours of  
 17 morning<sup>3</sup> and having parties.  
 18 M: M:m.  
 19 C: 1c→ And I've had enough:.  
 20 M: 2a→ And- and uh what've you done so far to try and-  
 21 (.) u-u:m (.) you know. t'resolve the issue.=  
 22 C: =I've phoned poli:ce, I've phoned environmental  
 23 health,=  
 24 M: 2b→ =Oka:y .hhh and have you spoken to ↓he:r?  
 25 (1.3)
- 26 M: 2c→ about this,= H've you spoken to your ↓neighbor  
 27 about [t it?  
 28 C: 3a→ [>If I< went round (.) she wouldn't live.  
 29 (0.6)
- 30 C: Believe me.  
 31 M: 2d→ .HHhh >Yeh but-< bu- ha-have you actually tried  
 32 to speak with he:r?  
 33 (0.4)
- 34 C: No I have [↑n't ↓spoken to 'er]  
 35 M: 3b→ [No:. Cos you- ]  
 36 (.)
- 37 M: 3c→ Cos [y- cos  
 38 C: 3d→ [I ↑don't wanna ta:lk to 'e[r.  
 39 M: [Yeh. .hhh u:m

40           4→   .h alr- c'n I just really explain to you briefly  
 41                    what mediation: (.) i- how mediation wo:rkz (...)

The items marked 1a through 1c comprise C's initial problem description. The basic complaint topic is noise (1a) that is excessive (1b), and the object of C's grievance (1c). We return to the details of these components after summarizing the other parts of the main sequence. Items 2a through 2d are M's inquiry about whether C has tried talking to her neighbor about the problem. 2a is open ended about what kind of efforts C may have made, but following C's nomination of two other agencies (lines 22–23), M does not pursue those but instead asks whether C has tried talking to her neighbor (2c and 2d). M's repetition of her inquiry at 2d treats C's initially extreme response at 3a (lines 28 and 30) as nonliteral (cf. Edwards, 2000, on nonliteral uses and uptakes of extreme expressions), with M's literalness signaled by the insertion of "actually" (line 31). Items 3a through 3d are C's negative responses to M's inquiry and include two accounts for that negative response: the prospect of lethal violence (3a) and (following M's "actually" pursuit) the downgraded account "I ↑don't wanna ta:lk to 'er" (Item 3d). M's repetitions of "cos you" (Items 3b and 3c) frame and prompt the sense of what C is saying as providing accounts or reasons. Last, Item 4 is M's offer to explain what the mediation service provides, and this follows directly on C's account for why she has not tried resolving the problem herself by talking to her neighbor about it (which are the terms in which M frames her inquiry at lines 20–21).

The general action sequence 1 through 4 is recurrent and robust across our data as are various features of it that we now flesh out by examining details of Extract 1 along with examples from other calls. The analysis is organized around the second component, M's asking the self-help question, focusing on what precedes and occasions it, how it is designed, and what follows it. We start, then, with Component 1, the initial complaint.

### The Initial Complaint

We draw attention to three features of the initial complaint in Extract 1:

1. The complaint is built as *persistent or recurrent* and not just a one-off event. In Extract 1, this is done by various devices including extreme case

formulations (ECFs) as in “every single wee:kend.” (line 8); see Pomerantz (1986) and Edwards (2000, 2005) on the uses of ECFs in making complaints. Other generalizing devices include the iterative, *historic* present tense of “she’s coming home” and “having parties” (lines 16–17). C produces these generalized and extrematized expressions in response to M’s rather minimal receipt (repetition and acknowledgement, lines 5 and 7, but no evaluation or assessment) of C’s complaint, “It’s her noise.” They work to elaborate and upgrade the noise as excessive and complaint worthy.

2. There is an expression of grievance on C’s part, which is another standard feature of complaints (Drew, 1998; Edwards, 2005; Stokoe, 2003; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005). Item 1c “And I’ve had enough:.” formulates C’s negative experience of and reaction to the neighbor’s persistent late night noise.

3. Additionally, the expression “had enough” has the semantics of completeness or finality and marks the complaint itself as now possibly done or complete enough such that some response from M becomes relevant. It is precisely at this point that M starts to inquire about prior efforts at self-help (line 20).

These features of the initial problem description (general sequence Item 1) can also be seen in Extracts 2 through 7 in which again C builds the excessive and complainable nature of the problem and signals some kind of possible completeness of the initial complaint just prior to where M produces the self-help inquiry (which is our general sequence Item 2):

(2) DC:80:19

- 1 C: (...) She jet washed the path on Sun:day. .hh and  
 2 it took a few hours to dry.= Luckily it drie:d.  
 3 before it got- (. ) y'know co:ld at ni:ght  
 4 otherwise it'd a frō:ze. .hhh [h So ] it's not=  
 5 M: [Yeh.]  
 6 C: =that. When she jet washed it all the water  
 7 went into my cellar again. .hh S'I ended up  
 8 wi' a big puddle o' water in my cellar;  
 9 (0.6)  
 10 M: Ri:ght. Okay. .h ↑Have y'spoken to her about  
 11 that.

(3) DC:12:80

- 1 C: =The ↑dad seems all right but it's that bo:y I don'  
 2 wanna be- an' 'e doesn' e'en go to school so:.=

3 M: =.hhh hRigh:=- uh have you spoken to his ↓dad  
4 a[bout this,]

(4) DC:76:26

1 C: (...) we can't understand why: he's uh (0.4) he's doing  
2 these sorts of thi:ngs >if y'know what I mean,<  
3 (0.5)  
4 M: R:i:ght, o[kay  
5 C: [↑I'VE A LIST (.) love here as long as  
6 y'r ar:m that we'v- we wer- actually sat down an'  
7 talked about, (0.3) an' we've written the list out  
8 now that we've got that we could reel off if you  
9 know what I mean,  
10 M: R:i:ght. um .hh have you spoken to 'im (.) since h  
11 (0.2)

(5) DC:41:103

1 C: (...) but (0.3) does it mean that we've r\*eally got  
2 to live in an env\*ironment like this where we've  
3 got r\*ats runnin' around they're [runnin' around=  
4 M: [Yeh.hh  
5 C: =in my garden like they own it?  
6 (0.4)  
7 M: R:i:ght o:kay.= .hhh Have y- have you spoken  
8 to him: 'bout this: y'haven't spoken to him.  
9 (0.6)

(6) DC:27:74

1 M: ↑↑So d'y'think it might be a ca:se of mistaken  
2 i↑dentity £then. [that she thinks it's yo(h)ur=  
3 C: [.hHH heh  
4 M: =st(h)ere(h)o a(h)nd i(h)t's someone els [e's?£  
5 C: [↑I DON't  
6 KNOW y'kno:w \*it's:: u:m (.) I've just- had a lot  
7 o' problems since [I moved in ( [ ] ).  
8 M: [Ri::ght. .h [Have y'spoken  
9 to 'er about it at a:ll.

(7) DC:57:44

1 C: (...) And he's effin' an' blindin' this that and the  
2 othe:r? .hhh An' that really angers m=- <I don't

- 3 swear.  
 4 (.)  
 5 C: .hh I certainly never want to hear it come out my  
 6 children's mouth.= ↑But they have been swea:rin'?  
 7 .hhh Because they've hea:rd 'im do it and they think  
 8 it's funny:, .h because it's gettin' them attention  
 9 so the:y're doin' i:t.  
 10 (.)  
 11 C: .hhh=  
 12 M: =Ye [:s.  
 13 C: [D'y'know what I me:an an' it's [like .hhh=  
 14 M: [Yeh.  
 15 C: =as a pa:rent you've got a ha:rd enough job t'↓do:  
 16 without somebody like this. .hhh Y'kno:w.  
 17 (0.5)  
 18 M: Mmye:h. .hhh uh have you spoken to him:: 'bout thi[s.

Extracts 2 through 7 (unlike Extract 1) start at points already some way into an extended narrative in which the neighbor's behavior has been built as complainable in terms of its nature and excess along with a sense of grievance on C's part. In the extracted parts shown in the preceding, one finds excess again marked by ECFs: "all the water" (Extract 2), "A LIST ... as long as y'r ar:m" (Extract 4), and "certainly never" (Extract 7) along with grievances in the form of recognizable domestic crises caused by the neighbor: a flooded cellar (Extract 2), rat infestation (Extract 5), delinquent teenagers (Extract 3), one's own children adopting foul language (Extract 7), and persistent false complaining against C (the topic of Extracts 4 and 6). As in Extract 1, complainers depict problems as recurrent or long-term: "again" (Extract 2, line 7), "doesn'" (Extract 3, line 2)<sup>4</sup>; "he's doing" (Extract 4, line 1), "we've got r\*ats runnin' around" (Extract 5, lines 2–3), "a lot o'problems since [I moved in" (Extract 6, lines 6–7), and "they have been swea:rin'?" (Extract 7, line 6).

The other noteworthy feature of C's complaint sequence is the presence, as in Extract 1 and across our data, of some kind of *recognizable closure* or sign of possible completion<sup>5</sup> of the complaint just prior to M asking the self-help question. Possible completeness, signaling the appropriateness of a response from M, is marked in a variety of ways including (a) semantic completeness as in "and I've had enough" (Extract 1) or "S'I ended up wi' ..." (Extract 2, lines 7–8); (b) formulaic or idiomatic glosses (cf. Drew & Holt, 1995) such as "as a pa:rent you've got a ha:rd enough job t'↓do: ..." (Extract 7, lines 15–16) and "runnin' around ... like they own

it?” (Extract 5, lines 3–5) in which the final questioning try-marker intonation also marks a possible turn ending and pursuit of response; and (c) gists, summaries, or upshots positioned as possible complaint completion markers such as “I’ve just- had a lot o’ problems since [I moved in” (Extract 6, lines 6–7) and the probably nonserious offer to “reel off” a long written list of complaint items in Extract 4 (see also Emmison & Danby, 2007, on uses of *and I don’t know what to do*). Similarly, in Extract 5, lines 1 through 3, C’s description of rats running around repeats an earlier report of it, posing it now as an upshot question with “really”—“does it mean that we’ve r\*really got to. ...” Expressions such as “if you know what I mean” (Extract 4, lines 2 and 8–9) and “y’know” (Extract 7, line 16) also signal possible turn completion, occurring in each case (like the rising try-marker intonations in Extracts 2 and 5) immediately preceding M’s receipt and self-help inquiry.

One further completion device is the stand-alone “so” in Extract 3, line 2 (see Raymond, 2004). Despite looking semantically like a signal that C will continue, the stand-alone *so* is routinely a way of finishing a complex turn, such as a complaint narrative, and of prompting action from a recipient. It trades on the more general use of *so* as a TCU-prefacing device<sup>6</sup> to “articulate the upshot of prior talk to mark the completion of complex turns or activities and thereby pursue a limited range of actions from their recipients” (Raymond, 2004, p. 186). What it seems to do here is project some expectable, ongoing, but unnecessary-to-further-elaborate problems (note C’s terminal pitch contour on “so:” and M’s latched next turn) of the kind that C has been outlining as the essential nature of her difficulties with *that boy* next door. All of which makes it relevant at this point for M to provide something in response.

In each of Extracts 2 through 7, M’s next turn starts by receipting the complaint as finished, using the tokens “right” and “okay,” which both acknowledge (“right”) C’s complaint and treat its action as done (“okay”). In Extract 4, M starts to do receipt and closure at line 4 following C’s first movement into gist and upshot (lines 1–2); but in overlap with M’s “Okay,” C does a further bit of idiomatic glossing (lines 5–9) whereupon M reiterates the acknowledgment (line 10) before posing the self-help question.

The relevance of these signals of possible complaint completion, on C’s part, is not only the general relevance when doing complex actions such as complaining and storytelling, of showing when that activity is coming to completion. In our cases, there is an additional relevance generated by a normative expectation that some kind of effort at self-help is expectable as

a precondition for requesting it. There are other considerations such as the relevance of self-help to a problem's severity, but at least one basis for M to hold off asking about self-help until signs of complaint completion are given is that it allows C the opportunity to tell about it, or indeed to fail to have done so, as an expectable part of her initial story. In other words, there appears to be an oriented-to preference for self-help to be a topic first broached by C rather than by M.

### The Self-Help Question

One also sees the normativity of prior efforts at self help when examining the design of Part 2 of the general sequence, which is M's inquiry about self-help. We start again with the relevant part of Extract 1:

(1) DC:71:42

- 19 C: And I've had enough:.  
 20 M: → And- and uh what've you done so far to try and-  
 21 (.) u-u:m (.) you know. t'resolve the issue.=  
 22 C: =I've phoned police, I've phoned environmental  
 23 health,=  
 24 M: → =Oka:y .hhh and have you spoken to ↓he:r?  
 25 (1.3)  
 26 M: → about this,= H've you spoken to your ↓neighbor  
 27 about [t it?  
 28 C: [>If I< went round (.) she wouldn't live.  
 29 (0.6)  
 30 C: Believe me.  
 31 M: → .HHhh >Yeh but-< bu- ha-have you actually tried  
 32 to speak with he:r?

We have noted that M's self-help inquiry is relevantly askable at just this juncture where it first occurs (line 20), as in our other extracts, on the basis that C has made a sometimes lengthy complaint but in any case has displayed its possible completion without having mentioned any efforts at resolving the problem herself. The notion that C might expectably have addressed this as part of her complaint narrative is also somewhat implied by M's *and-prefacing* of her question in line 20 whereby it is produced by M as if a continuation of C's story and of what C might expectably do. A further sense of prior self-help as expectable is given by M's "you know" in line 21. In this extract,

unusually in our data, M's initial formulation of the self-help question is open as to what kind of action it might involve, and here it gets a positive response—C has previously tried two other help agencies. Notably, however, M does not pursue those but latches a receipt (“Oka:y”) and a respecified inquiry at line 24, asking “and have you spoken to ↓he:r?,” and pursues this revised question through a couple of delays and reformulations.

Two features of M's inquiry, in addition to its sequential positioning, recur in the other extracts, further details of which we present following: the pursuit of this specific form of self-help, that is, *talking to the neighbor*, and the production of the inquiry as a somewhat delicate action. The delicacy is marked in Extract 1 in the stuttered, hesitant-sounding (or problematic-sounding) nature of its production at lines 20 through 21 with its two cutoffs and repairs (cf. also line 31) and the insertion of “you know” implying that the question should not be altogether unexpected or egregious. We now examine the design of M's inquiries in Extracts 2 through 7. Numbered extracts in the remainder of this article, even when they contain further turns, preserve the numbers assigned to them when first quoted:

(2) DC:80:19

10 M: Ri:ght. Okay. .h ↑Have y'sspoken to her about  
11 that.

(3) DC:12:80

3 M: =.hhh hRigh:=- uh have you sspoken to his ↓dad  
4 a[bout this,]

(4) DC:76:26

12 M: R:i:ght. um .hh have you sspoken to 'im (.) since h  
13 (0.2)

(5) DC:41:103

7 M: R:i:ght o:kay.= .hhh Have y- have you spoken  
8 to him: 'bout this: y'haven't spoken to him.  
9 (0.6)

(6) DC:27:74

8 M: [Ri:ght. .h [Have y'spo:ken  
9 to 'er about it at a:ll.

(7) DC:57:44

18 M: Mmye:h. .hhh uh have you spoken to him:: 'bout thi[s].

In each of the extracts, M's turn performs at least two actions. The first action is done by a TCU (or two in succession as in Extract 2) that acknowledges the complaint and perhaps also its completion ("right," "right okay," or "Mmyeh"), and the second action asks the self-help question ("have you spoken ..."). The close combination of those two actions, in that order and in the same turn, displays M's orientation to the self-help question as askable, having not already been addressed, on the completion of the complaint. Note that M's question is formulated specifically in terms of *C speaking to* the problem neighbor, and of having *already* done so ("have you ...") prior to calling for help. The perfect tense ("have you") is a significant feature in that it points back to the story of what C has already done rather than, say, forward in time as M's suggestion for what C might do subsequently. M does not presuppose that C has not already tried it but rather treats it as something that C may have done but not mentioned. Again, this orients to the normative notion that C might expectably have tried it.

With regard to that normative sense, M displays signs of delicacy in asking the question. These include delaying the question with ums and in breaths and occasionally cutoffs and restarts (Extract 5) and in Extract 5, the projected negative response "y' haven't spoken to him." This latter is particularly interesting given that these are telephone calls, so there is no visible sign of negativity available to M such as head shaking or postural movement. The projection of a negative response appears to be an inference from what C has told M about the problem, including the absence of any indication in her long narrative of having made any such efforts, along with the nonimmediate occurrence of any positive response from C after the possible completion point "to him:" and again after the TCU increment "bout this:" in line 8. Relevant also to the delicacy of M's inquiry, and this may be something that M can project on the basis of C's initial complaint narrative, is that it turns out in each case that C's not having mentioned efforts at self-help coincides with not apparently having made such efforts. The absence of (reported) efforts at self-help, prior to asking for help, is evidently noticeable.

Although we are focusing on occasions in which a self-help account is initially absent and M asks about it, the occasions in which C does mention such efforts in the initial complaint story throw up some relevant features. Briefly, M tends to pick out and formulate it as a notable action when it occurs. Examples include the following:

(8) LC:04:109

- 1 M: Uh you- you've had that- (0.2) conversation,  
 2 (.)  
 3 C: .pt.h I Ha [ve. Ye:h ] I mea:n I'v- I've had it befo:re=  
 4 M: [<sup>o</sup>with her<sup>o</sup>]

(9) LC:13:4

- 1 C: (...) Uh always got he:r cuffs up her- (.) he:r fist  
 2 up when she i- confrontations<sub>z</sub> .hhhhh [U:m  
 3 M: [<sup>↑</sup>So you've  
 4 (0.3) tried to approach he[r:

In each case, M's choice of what to formulate ("you've had that- (0.2) conversation" and "<sup>↑</sup>So you've (0.3) tried to approach he:r") marks C's reported actions as significant business for *this* interaction. Regarding the formulations themselves, note the details "*that* conversation," implying its status as a conversation of a generic and expectable kind; and "you've tried to approach her" as, again, a generic formulation of what C's reported actions amount to, shorn of the considerable narrative detail of which we catch just the end in the first two lines of Extract 9.

### The Client's Negative Answer and Account

We turn next to Component 3 of our general action sequence, this being C's responses to M's inquiries, starting again with Extract 1 at the point where M asks whether C has tried speaking with her neighbor:

(1) DC:71:42

- 24 M: =Oka:y .hhh and have you spoken to ↓he:r?  
 25 (1.3)  
 26 M: about this,= H've you spoken to your ↓neighbor  
 27 abou[t it?  
 28 C: [>If I< went round (.) she wouldn't live.  
 29 (0.6)  
 30 C: Believe me.  
 31 M: .HHhh >Yeh but-< bu- ha-have you actually tried  
 32 to speak with he:r?  
 33 (0.4)  
 34 C: No I have [<sup>↑</sup>n't ↓spoken to 'er ]  
 35 M: [No:. Cos you- ]

- 36           (.)  
 37 M: Cos [y- cos  
 38 C:       [I ↑don't wanna tɑ:lk to 'e[r.

After a long delay (line 25), M adds a turn increment (“about this”), which specifies the question, and then reformulates it (line 26) before C eventually answers (line 28) in overlap with the reformulated question. C’s answer is not only negative but, as we have noted, takes the form of an *account* for that negativity, amounting to avoiding the prospect of a lethal outcome. We have already remarked on the hearably ironic or nonseriousness of this death threat, and also M’s pursuit (her “actually,” her question repeats, and the “cos you’s”) that eventuate in C’s second explanation at line 38. In reframing the question, M’s expression “actually tried” (line 31) adds the normative sense of making serious efforts. The key features of C’s reply to M’s self-help question are that the answer is negative and that this negative answer is treated as accountable in so far as M prompts (“cos you ...”), and C provides (initially at line 28 and subsequently at line 38) an account for it. Here now are the relevant parts of Examples 2 through 7:

## (2) DC:80:19

- 10 M: Ri:ght. Okay. .h ↑Have y'spoken to her about  
 11       that.  
 12 C: Me no: cos we don't speak.  
 13 M: .hh Ri:ght. Okay. .hh.hh (.) \*u\*:m (...)

## (3) DC:12:80

- 3 M: =.hhh hRigh:=- uh have you spoken to his ↓dad  
 4       a[bout this,]  
 5 C: [I 'aven't ] really spoken to him? I don'-  
 6       I da:ren't speak to him, I don't kno:w,  
 7       (0.5)  
 8 M: .hh Ri:ght=

## (4) DC:76:26

- 12 M: R:i:ght. um .hh have you spoken to 'im (.) since h  
 13       (0.2)  
 14 C: We:ll communication's virtually broke down now.  
 15 M: .h (.) Ri:ght. \*Okay s'y'haven't mention- .hhh

## (5) DC:41:103

- 11 M: R:i:ght o:kay.= .hhh Have y- have you spoken to  
 12 him: 'bout this: y'haven't spoken to him.  
 13 (0.6)  
 14 C: U:h shall I t- shall I be honest with you.  
 15 (0.4)  
 16 C: We've tr\*ied speaking to him (0.2) on other time-  
 17 you know on other matters but  
 18 there's [no: way: getting through to him.=  
 19 M: [Yeh  
 20 C: =Well he doesn't wanna know.

## (6) DC:27:74

- 8 M: [Ri::ght. .h [Have y'spo:ken  
 9 to 'er about it at a:ll.  
 10 C: I won't speak to 'er.  
 11 M: No:. But I don' f- \*u-u- (0.3) ri:ght.  
 12 C: If- if I: speak to 'er I'll I'll (.) prob'ly  
 13 hi [t 'er. [>heheheheheh< ]  
 14 M: [.hhh B\*ut- (0.2) [( ) heh] what I'mj I'm  
 15 just wondering ho:w u:m a-have- (.) did y'speak to  
 16 'er in the pa:st an:' u[:m

## (7) DC:57:44

- 18 M: Mmye:h. .hhh uh have you spoken to him:: 'bout thi[s.  
 19 C: [hhh  
 20 Well, no I have\*n't. because I-\* (.) .hh recently I was  
 21 poo:rly >an' I 'ad< (0.2) viral meningi:tis >I was<  
 22 very poorly in be:d. .hhh An' um: (.) my children's  
 23 fa:ther went over an' (0.2) t- (0.2) try and speak to  
 24 ↓'im to tell 'im to turn it do:wn because I was ill I  
 25 need- y'know I couldn't rest because of i- (0.2) the  
 26 noi:se. .hhhhh An:d um 'e wou'n't answer the door to  
 27 ↑him? he wou'n't even open the do:or, (...)

Again, in each of Extracts 2 through 7, C provides a negative answer and an account. In Extract 2, the negative answer is simple and emphatic, “Me no:,” and the account takes the form of a generalized script or rule that prevents it: “cos we don't speak.” In Extract 3, the reply is hedged, “I 'aven't really spoken to him?,” but again negative and accounted for: “I don' - I da:ren't speak to him” (lines 5–6), with the *not daring* inserted as a

repair of merely *not doing* it.<sup>7</sup> In Extract 4, C's answer is simultaneously negative and an account: "communication's virtually broke down now," prefaced by "We:ll," which is a device that routinely signals that the answer to follow will not be a simple yes or no. Schegloff (2005) noted how in response to *WH*-questions, answers prefaced by *well* inform recipients that the response will not be straightforward. C's questions are typically *yes/no* rather than *WH*-questions, but the same observation seems to apply in these cases in so far as an account, and not just a simple factual answer, is relevant and oriented to as required. M then starts to formulate C's implied answer to her question: "s'y'haven't mention- .hhh."

C's response in Extract 5 is prefaced by use of an *honesty phrase* (line 14), one function of which is to frame dispreferred answers to questions including where answers possess some kind of *confessional* element (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006). The account, in this case, is C's previous difficulties in trying to talk to the neighbor about other matters. In Extract 6, C's response is bluntly negative (line 10), which seems to give M some difficulty in responding (line 11); we return to this theme later. C then expands on and accounts for her negative answer, citing the prospect of violence on her own part. As one saw in Extract 1, this threat is produced (line 13) and received (line 14) with laughter before M reformulates the question (without laughter) in search of the facts of the matter. Last, Extract 7 includes another "*well*"-prefaced negative answer accounted for by C's illness and also the refusal of the neighbor to talk with the father of C's children. The general pattern, then, is for M's self-help question to be answered in the negative by C and explained by one or more of several kinds of accounts including inability (e.g., illness), a generalized policy, disinclination or breakdown in talking, and an experience or prospect of intransigence or violence.

There are also signs in several of the extracts of M having some difficulty with C's negative answer and/or account, having already, as we have noted, displayed some kind of tentativeness or hesitancy in raising the question in the first place. M's initial difficulties with C's responses are visible in Extract 1 (lines 29, 31, 35–37, 39–40), and in Extracts 2 (line 13), 3 (lines 7–8), 4 (line 15), 6 (lines 11, 14), and 7 (line 11). Both in the production of the self-help question, then, and in the response to C's answer, M displays some kind of interactional difficulty or perturbation. We have noted that when M first asks the question, there is the relevance of a normative expectation that C might already have said something about having tried resolving the troubles herself as a precursor to asking for help. The

absence of such an account, from C's initial problem description, already starts to project the likelihood of a negative response to M's inquiries about it. However, there is an additional consideration that makes Part 4 of our general sequence (M's description of what mediation provides) relevant just where it occurs, following C's account for not having tried to resolve things: that is, that the mediation on offer is precisely a matter of talking to the neighbors, albeit via mediation, to try to resolve things. This is what makes the specific question "have you tried *speaking to* (them)" specially relevant for M as a way of checking if it has already been tried and with what effect and complications and projecting what kinds of difficulties there may be for mediation. It is also what makes the kinds of difficulties that C provides, as accounts for not having already tried it, potential problems for whatever M is able to offer as *mediation*.

### M's Offer to Explain Mediation or Redirect the Call

We turn now to an examination of this fourth and last component of the general sequence, M's offer to describe what mediation involves, starting again with Extract 1:

(1) DC:71:42

- 34 C: No I have [↑n't ↓spoken to 'er]  
 35 M: [No:. Cos you- ]  
 36 (.)  
 37 M: Cos [y- cos  
 38 C: [I ↑don't wanna ta:lk to 'e[r.  
 39 M: [Yeh. .hhh u:m  
 40 .h alr- c'n I just really explain to you brieftly  
 41 what mediation: (.) i- how mediation works (...)

We would surmise (not having relevant data to hand) that M's offer of an *explanation* (line 40) is unusual unless prompted by special difficulties in calls involving other kinds of agencies such as the emergency services given that people generally know what kind of thing those services provide (see Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007, on the special nature of 9-1-1 calls that seek advice or information). Neighbor dispute mediation is relatively new and unfamiliar in Britain, still not universally available; and callers often display ignorance of what it involves, ask whether they are calling the

right place, and may have to be directed to somewhere more appropriate. However, the feature we examine here is not only M's offer to explain mediation but its sequential placement. In Extract 1, M's offer to explain what the service provides immediately follows C's account for not having tried speaking with her problem neighbor. Recall that earlier in the extract (see the extended first presentation of it previously), M failed to pursue C's mention of two other agencies that C had called for help. It is specifically efforts to speak with the neighbor that M is concerned with. Given what mediation does involve (which M is about to explain), M's somewhat perturbed, cutoff, and hedged preface to offering her explanation (i.e., virtually all the transcriptional details of line 40) are plausibly an orientation to C's immediately prior announcement, "I ~~do~~'t wanna ta:lk to 'er."—which would of course, if sustained, make mediation very difficult.

In the other data extracts, C's account for not having already spoken to the neighbor is more extended than in Extract 1, and we do not reproduce all of those extended sequences here. However, the continuation of Extract 3 (following) shows the end of such a sequence:

(3) DC:12:80

- 17 C (...) Because I know as soon as they moved in our  
 18 um ca:r (.) \*u- um car, they broke into our car,  
 19 an' I know it's ↓them as well.  
 20 (0.2)  
 21 M: .hhh ↓Do you ri:gh- an' you haven't spo:ken to  
 22 them at [↓a:ll about this. .hhhhh]  
 23 C: [No: I 'av'nt spo:ken to ] them I don't  
 24 kno:w what t'do:.  
 25 (0.3)  
 26 M: Ri::ght. Okay .hhh Sh- (.) so can \*I- shall I  
 27 tell y'a little bit about what\* we: ↓do an'=  
 28 C: =[ R i : g h t. ]  
 29 M: =[then you can dec ]ide wha- .hhh (...)

M's comment at lines 21 through 22 formulates what C reported earlier, generalized now to "them" (not only the boy's father) and "at ↓a:l" (line 22), providing a gist for C's extended account that she had not tried speaking to her problem neighbors prior to calling for help. M's reiteration of it here, and C's confirmation, immediately precedes M's offer to tell C about what mediators do. The additional TCU "I don't kno:w what t'do:," with its elongated intonation on "do:," serves as a prompt for M to receipt

C's completed account ("Ri:ght. Okay," line 26) and offer to explain what the service provides (see also Emmison & Danby, 2007, on similar uses of *I don't know what to do*). Again, M's offer begins in a perturbed manner, with two cutoffs and restarts (line 26), following C's account of why she not merely has not spoken to them but is afraid to do so. The rest of our data extracts display the same basic pattern in which M offers to explain what mediation provides after having obtained from C an account for why C has not already tried talking to the neighbors. However, our final extract in this section shows an exception to that pattern in that M offers something else instead:

(10) DC:35:19

- 1 M: \*Ri:ght. =Have you spoken to their parents [or::  
 2 C: [Um well  
 3 fu- one of the parents she uh (0.4) complained to  
 4 one of them and she ended up hitting me?  
 5 (0.2)  
 6 C: So there's no point talking to them. .hhh an' but  
 7 because I hit her back the police're saying there's  
 8 nothing they can do.,  
 9 (0.5)  
 10 M: Ri::ght. .hhh U::m (0.8) >I mean< u:m I could give  
 11 you the num: are you \*u\*u (0.2) >are y'wantin'<  
 12 t's:speak to s: u::h the harassment team is that  
 13 (0.4)  
 14 C: Is it we:ll would they be able t'help d'y'thi:nk.

The basis for M not offering to explain what mediation provides at just the juncture where M (i.e., a collection of different Ms) generally does that is first that M has already, prior to the self-help question at line 1, outlined what the mediation service provides. It is also clear that M understands C's complaint as properly directed to an alternative kind of service (lines 10–11). That alternative is in turn occasioned by C's report of actual violence having occurred (lines 4 and 7) along with police involvement. Rather than mediation, then, M offers to give C the phone number of "the harassment team." Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, the same basic normative sequence prevails that we have found throughout and that we outlined at the start of the analysis: (a) M elicits from C an initial problem or complaint narrative on the evident completion of which it appears that

no effort has been made to talk to the problem neighbors (this occurs prior to the start of Extract 10), (b) M asks if that is so (the *self-help question* at line 1), (c) C provides a negative answer and accounts for it (again “*well*”-prefaced; lines 2–8), and (d) M orients to that account by offering an explanation of what mediation provides or else (lines 10–12) a referral to a more appropriate help agency.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have examined how self-help, in the form of trying to speak to a complained-of neighbor, features as a normative preliminary to asking for help, at least with regard to the kinds of everyday, personal relations problems represented by neighbor complaints. Its normativity was displayed in a range of features of M’s question about it, including its occurrence following various kinds of completeness markers in C’s initial complaint; M’s delicate way of asking about it; the joint orientation to the matter as accountable; and various other features such as M’s tendency to pick it out in formulations of the essence of what C has said. The absence of efforts at self-help was accounted for by C, typically in terms of the past experience and/or future prospect of failure due to intransigence or violence. Through these features and practices, both C and M display a normative *preference* for C to provide a self-help account as part of the initial complaint narrative rather than for M to have to ask for it.

We also showed how C’s account for not having tried talking to the problem neighbor provided a relevant opportunity, given the *talking together* nature of mediation, for M to explain what the service offers. The often hedged and delicate ways in which M asked the self-help question and later offered to explain the mediation process was related to the normative expectation that such efforts might already have been made and to the fact that talking to the neighbor is a defining feature of what mediation would involve.

With regard to comparisons with some other kinds of help calls, neighbor problems—unlike crimes, fires, accidents, police emergencies, reporting faulty goods, and so forth—generally have to be defined as repeated, persistent, long-term kinds of problems. Generally that is a feature of the problem description, as we noted for the examples analyzed, but also, when not already addressed, M may ask about it, as here:

(11) DC:73:13

- 1 M: .h Ri:ght. I see: right.= \*An' \*is tha\*t\* (0.3)  
 2 music being played uh- all the ↓time y' [thin:k,=  
 3 C: [Yes love  
 4 it is yeh.]  
 5 M: =.hhhh ] Rhighht. Okahy. (...)

The relevance of *prior self-help* to other kinds of help calls, as a normative and oriented-to feature of those settings and their associated problems, requires detailed empirical attention (see Baker, Emmison, & Firth, 2001, on its occurrence in calls to a technical helpline). However, we would expect it to be relevant on the basis that any request for help normatively presupposes that help is needed and that the requester is not in a position to easily fix things themselves, at least not without difficulty, danger, or special expertise, and in any case will have done whatever minimal thing might be reasonably expected, such as checking the facts of the matter, and that the problem is relevant to and warrants the attention of the agency called. With regard to dangerous situations such as large fires and violent crime, institutional advice is often to report and not interfere and in the case of faults with complex electronic equipment, to do nothing that might void the warranty. In the case of everyday personal and relationship problems, as Sacks (1972) noted, calling for professional help may be accountable as a last rather than first resort.

## NOTES

- 1 Relevant to that are the familiar moral-political categories of people such as welfare scroungers, beggars, the unemployed, asylum seekers, and so on. In Britain, one is no longer entitled to unemployment benefit by being unemployed. The category is “job-seeker,” and it is called the “job-seeker’s allowance.” So, again, help is conditional on efforts to help oneself.
- 2 This research is part of the authors’ Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (UK) funded project RES-148-25-0010, “Identities in neighbour discourse: Community, conflict and exclusion.”
- 3 The omission of definite articles in this turn is standard in the speaker’s Yorkshire, England dialect.
- 4 “Doesn’t even go to school” again uses the *historic* present tense, generalizing the boy’s truancy as regular and persistent, a “dispositional” feature of his actions: See Edwards

- (1994, 1995, 2006) on this and other “scripting devices” by which the recurrent nature of events and actions is formulated.
- 5 *Possible completion* is a conversation analytic term generally used of turn constructional units (TCUs; see Note 6) or of turns, but here we use it of an extended sequence such as a complaint narrative whose completion, like stories in general, often require some kind of marking as to when they are done (cf. Sacks, 1992, on telling stories).
  - 6 TCU is *turn constructional unit*, the term in conversation analysis for what turns are made from and what minimal complete turns can consist of, which is any word or combination of words that can perform a recognizably complete action or response.
  - 7 It is possible that C’s repairable “I don’-” (Extract 3, line 5) was a start on the “I don’t know” that she went on to say; but at the point of its production, “I don’-” is cut off and “I da:ren’t” then inserted in its place.

## REFERENCES

- Baker, C., Emmison, M., & Firth, A. (2001). Discovering order in opening sequences in calls to a software helpline. In A. McHoul & M. Rapley (Eds.), *How to analyse talk in institutional settings: A casebook of methods* (pp. 41–56). London: Continuum International.
- Drew, P. (1998). Complaints about transgressions and misconduct. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 31, 295–325.
- Drew, P., & Holt, E. (1995). Idiomatic expressions and their role in the organization of topic transition in conversation. In M. Everaert, E. J. van der Linden, A. Schenk, & R. Schreuder (Eds.), *Idioms: Structural and psychological perspectives* (pp. 117–132). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Edwards, D. (1994). Script formulations: A study of event descriptions in conversation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13, 211–247.
- Edwards, D. (1995). Two to tango: Script formulations, dispositions, and rhetorical symmetry in relationship troubles talk. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 28, 319–350.
- Edwards, D. (2000). Extreme case formulations: Softeners, investment, and doing nonliteral. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 33, 347–373.
- Edwards, D. (2001, August). *Couples, conflict and counseling*. Paper presented at Language and Therapeutic Interaction: An International Conference, Brunel University, London, England.
- Edwards, D. (2005). Moaning, whinging and laughing: The subjective side of complaints. *Discourse Studies*, 7, 5–29.
- Edwards, D. (2006). Facts, norms and dispositions: Practical uses of the modal *would* in police interrogations. *Discourse Studies*, 8, 475–501.
- Edwards, D., & Fasulo, A. (2006). “To be honest”: Sequential uses of honesty phrases in talk-in-interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 39, 343–376.

- Emmison, M., & Danby, S. (2007/this issue). Troubles announcements and reasons for calling: Initial actions in opening sequences in calls to a national children's helpline. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 40, 63–87.
- Heritage, J., & Robinson, J. (2006). Accounting for the visit: Giving reasons for seeking medical care. In J. Heritage & D. W. Maynard (Eds.), *Communication in medical care: Interaction between physicians and patients* (pp. 48–85). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Meehan, A. J. (1989). Assessing the “police-worthiness” of citizen's complaints to the police: Accountability and the negotiation of “facts.” In D. T. Helm, W. T. Anderson, A. J. Meehan, & A. W. Rawls (Eds.), *The interactional order: New directions in the study of social order* (pp. 116–140). New York: Irvington.
- Oxford English Dictionary: Second edition on compact disc: Version 3.0.* (2002). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Pomerantz, A. (1986). Extreme Case formulations: A way of legitimizing claims. *Human Studies*, 9, 219–229.
- Raymond, G. (2004). Prompting action: The stand-alone “so” in ordinary conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 37, 185–218.
- Raymond, G., & Zimmerman, D. H. (2007/this issue). Rights and responsibilities in calls for help: The case of the Mountain Glade fire. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 40, 33–61.
- Sacks, H. (1972). An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology. In D. Sudnow (Ed.), *Studies in social interaction* (pp. 31–74). Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation* (Vol. 1). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2005). On complainability. *Social Problems*, 52, 449–476.
- Stokoe, E. H. (2003). Mothers, single women and sluts: Gender, morality and membership categorization in neighbour disputes. *Feminism & Psychology*, 13, 317–344.
- Stokoe, E. H., & Hepburn, A. (2005). “You can hear a lot through the walls”: Noise formulations in neighbor complaints. *Discourse & Society*, 16, 647–673.
- Tracy, K. (1997). Interactional trouble in emergency service requests: A problem of frames. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 30, 315–343.
- Whalen, M. R., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1990). Describing trouble: Practical epistemology in citizen calls to the police. *Language in Society*, 19, 465–492.