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Help-Seeking Decisions and Child Welfare

An exploration of situated decision-making

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Declaration

No part of the work submitted in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of the University of Central Lancashire or any other University or educational institution. This thesis does, however, draw on my own previously published work and where I do draw on published work this is identified in the text. Full details of these publications appear in the bibliography.

An earlier draft of chapter 1 was published as a research review paper in *Child and Family Social Work* with the title: 'Engaging Parents and Carers with Family Support Services, what can be learned from the literature on help-seeking (2003). I also make reference to the material presented in chapter 1 in a book chapter forthcoming in 2006 with the title: 'Multi-agency responses to Refugee Children'

Some of the research materials described in chapter 2 were drawn from another research project commissioned by a Local Education Authority, on the topic of 'Missing children'. This project has been reported on in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* in a co-authored paper with Corinne May-Chahal (2005).

In chapter 7 I illustrate how research participants use conventional knowledge of category-predicated helping activities as a resource in situated decision-making. A paper forthcoming in *Health and Social Care in the Community* draws on some of the observations made in this chapter (see bibliography for full references).

A further article has recently been submitted to *Qualitative Health Research* with the title: 'Membership Categorisation Analysis: an alternative to content analysis in focus group research'. This paper draws on some of the content of chapters 2 and 3 and uses extracts of data considered in later chapters in the thesis.

Abstract

Family support services aim to support parents and carers with the task of bringing up children; these services consistently report problems, however, in attracting help-seekers. Despite recent developments within child-welfare towards the provision of family-friendly services, self-referral rates remain low constituting at best 30% of all referrals. Agencies also report that families are reluctant to take up services following third party (frequently professional) referral. Despite these consistent findings the extant literature on help-seeking offers few insights into *how* social actors, in the face of family problems, make choices between the available sources of help. Within the extant literature studies consistently report that families prefer 'informal' support but few insights are offered about how such decisions are made and how preference is organised in relation to diverse sources of support. In this thesis and focusing on talk about 'help-seeking' in focus group and interview settings, analysis centres on exploring the accountable properties of situated decision-making. From analysis of situated talk, the study offers insights and raises questions for further research that may assist family support agencies to more appropriately tailor their services to meet the needs of service users.

The present study is much inspired by the work of Harvey Sacks in particular his development of Membership Categorisation Analysis. In making use of Hester and Eglin's occasioned model of MCA (1997) it has been possible to explore practical reasoning in and through the local, sequential and categorical organisation of talk. Analysis of situated decision-making, in relation to the topic 'help-seeking', finds decision-making a highly organised practical activity such that any social actor can make an 'educated' guess about who, another, would suggest as a first category for help. Research participants, in deciding who should hypothetically be approached first for help, constituted a socially sanctioned order to help-seeking characterised by first-position category pairs and last-position category pairs. Use of, or reference to, prior knowledge of help-seeking encounters was also identified as a key decision-making resource.

This thesis concludes with a policy discussion and raises a number of speculative comments arising from the study that are relevant for the development of child welfare services. A number of avenues are suggested for further research, in particular questions are asked about the continued practice and emphasis within child-welfare services on professional social diagnosis, with the attendant neglect of help-seeking as a socially organised activity. The study suggests that future research might centre on further analysis of how 'family support' is organised within the family and prior to professional intervention. It is also suggested that further research examine the possibilities of response to requests for help as a better starting point for service delivery, rather than professional detection of 'problems'.

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Introduction

Help-seeking decisions and child welfare

Getting a focus

Whilst there is a vast literature concerned with the topic of child-welfare and the organisation of family support services, few questions have been asked to date about *help-seeking* as a practical activity within child-welfare. The landscape of services in the UK that are designed to support families¹ and safeguard children, has for much of the last two decades, been dominated by services organised around response to ‘high-risk’ child protection cases and the detection of ‘significant harm’. In this context, research interest in how families have *entered* services has predominantly focused on ‘detection and reporting’, with the central aim of increasing the reporting of cases of maltreatment. Studies have focused on matters such as ‘thresholds’, ‘agreement’ or ‘levels of compliance’ in relation to reporting. Given that families have tended to enter services via third party or professional referral, research interest has centred on *professional* rather than lay referral processes.

Questions about help-seeking are of more recent relevance and have arisen in the context of what has come to be known as the ‘re-focusing debate’ within children’s services (Broadhurst, 2003)². Research findings in the 1990s, in particular

¹ The device ‘family’ is used throughout this thesis as a communicative device, however, the majority of those using/referred to family support services are single female headed households with children. As the thesis progresses I refer to the device ‘family’ as occasioned (chapter 5). That is, the categories that are considered to constitute the device ‘family’ are ascribed membership in and through local categorisation work.

² In chapter 1, I have drawn on an earlier research review which I submitted to *Child and Family Social Work* and was published in volume 8, 2003 (see bibliography for full reference).

Messages from Research (DOH, 1995a), not only identified that services designed to safeguard children and support families were focused primarily on investigation, but also that this organisation resulted in large numbers of families being caught up in child protection systems unnecessarily. In addition, where such families requested support, in the absence of evidence of significant harm no support services were offered³ (Audit Commission, 1994; DOH, 1995a; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Parton, 1997). The organisation of services, with a primarily forensic gaze, thus resulted in the alienation of local communities from child protection services; families requiring support and children in need failed to fulfil the criteria for professional intervention. The re-focusing debate called for a move away from the primarily investigative practices associated with child protection towards services with a child-welfare focus, which aimed to encourage families to proactively *seek* help (Tomison, 1997).

The current landscape of services designed to safeguard children and support families can be described as post-*Messages from Research* (Frost et al., 2000) and is characterised by a mixed economy of traditional and innovative family support initiatives with a child-welfare focus. In particular a raft of initiatives, typified by programmes such as Sure Start, aim to provide ‘family-friendly services’ that offer social and practical support that stimulates *self*-referral from target communities. The new paradigm of child-welfare is characterised by a language of voluntarism, empowerment and partnership and represents a trend which is common not only to

³ The social helping agencies which provide family support are of central interest to this study. Family support can be described as the creation and enhancement of accessible services, to support families with the task of caring for children. Family support services aim to promote parental/ carer competence and increase parental/carers capacity to nurture and protect children. Services are seen as an extension of, or complimentary to the support already provided to families by the informal network (Manktelow, 2003).

the UK, but also the USA, Canada and Australia (Spratt and Callan, 2004). Family support services are envisaged as local, low-key and user-friendly (Gilligan 2000). There has been a move away from reactive services which intervene after incidents of maltreatment, towards early intervention and prevention of family breakdown. Services aim to place family support, rather than child protection as central, with a focus on compensating for network deficits, supporting parenting and improving developmental outcomes for children.

New developments in family support services have spawned a flurry of evaluative studies. Questions about help-seeking, however, remain marginal to such studies and this is in spite of the emphasis on early intervention and prevention. Research has continued to focus on entry to formal services, collecting information on the number and types of referral to professional services. Recent moves towards integrated children's services and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) continue to stress the role of the professional in identification of need, with a marked absence of attention to help-seeking processes in target communities (DfES, 2004a; DfES, 2004b). The high profile case of Victoria Climbié, a child who died at the hands of her carers, has provided the referent for very recent developments such as CAF (DfES, 2003). Whilst the Climbié case clearly represents tragic circumstances for a child, the case has resulted in a resurgence of interest in *detection* of need. CAF represents a move to broaden, across health and welfare, the number of diverse professionals who are able to identify a child 'in need' or 'at risk' of significant harm (DfES, 2003).

Questions about help-seeking are important, as one might speculate that help-seeking is somewhat a barometer of the success of new family-friendly initiatives. However, it is difficult to glean much about help-seeking from the available literature due to the continued emphasis on reporting and referral. Whilst the current literature offers findings about patterns of referral, without considering processes prior to service entry, studies offer few insights into how it is that an individual decides to seek formal help. Studies which focus on referral patterns are also problematic in further ways. First, in the case of referral to services designed to safeguard families and support children, one cannot assume any correspondence between help-seeker and referrer; a family may be referred to a support agency for help but may not be seeking or have requested help themselves. Second, help-seeking is an activity not confined to the professional sphere; the findings from even 'family-friendly' services indicate reluctance in target communities to seek help, with families drawing much of their support from informal sources (Oakley et al., 1998; Armstrong and Hill, 2001; Macdonald and Williamson, 2002; Spratt and Callan, 2004).

The Department of Health estimated in 2001, that 4 million children were vulnerable due to income levels alone, but only 300,000-400,000 were known to social services. In addition, of those using social services, three-quarters were repeat referrals (Spratt and Callan, 2004). Several authors have also suggested that the number of troubled children is increasing (Buchanan and Hudson, 2000; Statham and Holterman, 2004). Whilst it is difficult to infer under-utilisation services from these figures, they suggest that those using services are a small number compared to the potential number of vulnerable families in the UK. There is also significant

concern that families are referred to services too late, with key indicators such as the rising number of children entering the care system providing the evidence for this concern (DfES, 2004c). To date, however, little is known about the different forms of support that vulnerable families may draw on or how help-seeking from diverse sources is organised. Help-seeking processes in target communities remain under-researched, with few empirical findings offered about help-seeking as a socially organised activity. Whilst *self*-referral is seen as a marker of effectiveness for new ‘family-friendly’ initiatives, there is a dearth of studies offering insights about *how* an individual comes to decide that he or she will seek help from diverse sources.

The present study commenced in October 2002 and examines practical decision-making in focus group and interview talk. In the focus groups and interviews participants were asked to consider questions about help-seeking. At the outset of this work, the project was driven by a desire to find out something about help-seeking preferences and to understand ‘what’ motivates social actors in the face of family problems, to seek help from available sources. Drawing inspiration from studies across fields of health and welfare, I considered the familiar questions of variable analysis, which suggest relationships between factors such as ‘gender’, ‘age’, ethnicity’ or ‘social class’ and help-seeking and/or a project which sought the ‘meanings’ which social actors attach to requests for help. As the project progressed I began to significantly review these initial aims and the project became a study of *how*, in situations of practical reasoning, social actors invoke, make relevant or orient to different categories of help-provider⁴, thus making decisions about appropriate sources of help. As the following chapters of this thesis reveal, the key

⁴ The term ‘help-provider’ is used as a gloss, referring to and serving to collect together individuals who may situationally be seen to have predicated helping obligations.

focus of analytic attention in this work is on the *methods* which social actors deploy, as displayed in talk-in-interaction, which provide for the selection of one category of help-provider over another. How it is in conversation that one can accountably select in responses to questions about help, the category ‘mother’, for example, and that such a response be accepted as an accountable⁵ response? Is it possible to identify the accountable properties of situated decision-making that provide for the principled selection, invocation or relevance of one source of help or another? In taking as a focus ‘talk-in-interaction’, this methodological focus requires some explanation.

Some methodological choices and considerations

Starting out as a PhD student and following a familiar path through the research process, work commenced with a review of the existing literature. Following in the footsteps of a number of researchers before me and given the dearth of studies specific to family support, another project which followed a conventional⁶ path in search of the ‘whats’ of help-seeking seemed legitimate. In the spring of 2003, however, I began to experience a certain frustration with the questions which were posed and the answers that were given in the help-seeking literature and across fields of health and welfare. I noted that studies equated help-seeking with patterns of service use, and focusing on the point of *entry* to formal services, they offered few

⁵ The term ‘accountable’ is taken from Garfinkel. In chapter 3, I offer a detailed explanation of how this concept is used in ethnomethodologically informed studies.

⁶ The expression ‘conventional’ social science is taken from the ethnomethodological literature, with studies pervasively juxtaposing conventional social research with ethnomethodological works. Whilst I make use of the term ‘conventional social science’ this is not with any intent to ironise or suggest any superior vantage point to ‘conventional’ social science. Rather, in using this expression I simply mark a distinction between studies which follow the formal analytic approach to studying social order and an alternative approach as suggested by Garfinkel in which analytic attention focuses on the *co-production* of social order. The methodological approach taken in this thesis will be described in chapters 3 & 4.

insights into *how* individuals arrive at decisions to seek help. What I found puzzling in the literature was that, whilst it was frequently expressed at the start of research accounts that how individuals choose between sources of help is critical to understanding help-seeking, the work⁷ of choosing, selecting or prioritising one form of help over another was frequently over looked. Research commenced with certain pre-formulated notions of factors which the researcher made relevant to the topic of help-seeking. Researchers posited *a priori* a relationship between a number of variables and help-seeking, such as 'stigma', 'self-esteem', 'social class', or 'gender'. In all these studies the 'contingencies' of help-seeking were stated *a priori* by the analyst and framed the research process. Clearly concepts such as 'social class' and 'gender' are part and parcel of the received language of social scientific inquiry. However, what such studies appeared to miss was *how* a social actor decides to seek help from diverse sources.

In making these observations early on in the journey through this project, I was fortunate enough to be given a book by my supervisor to read with the title '*Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action*' (Lynch, 1993). This marked a significant turning point in my work as I came to understand what ethnomethodologists refer to as the irredeemable *reflexivity*⁸ of accounts. At this point, now some 18 months into the project, I began to understand how it was that studies which commenced with pre-formulated notions, equations and relationships of the help-seeking process, could proceed in this way without raising significant questions. Thus my initial ironic appreciation of the literature became diluted by an appreciation of the social

⁷ When I use the term 'work', I refer to processes of practical reasoning; judging, inferring, deciding and so forth. The term 'work' is familiar in the ethnomethodological literature- see, for example, Jayyusi (1984), Wattam (1996).

⁸ This term is from Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel stated that actions and accounts of those accounts were always endogenous to the setting of their production. This term will be further explained in chapter 3.

organisation of social scientific accounting. I began to appreciate, for example, that studies which commenced with the sociological concepts such as ‘stigma’ or ‘social class’, positing *a priori* a relationship between selected variables and help-seeking, were simply following in the socially organised practices of social research. Notions of social class, or stigma, as defined by an established interpretive system, could proceed in this way on the basis of the embeddedness of such interpretive ‘indices’⁹ within the vernacular and practices of research communities. What such approaches gloss, however, is the situated moral reasoning of help-seeking decision-making.

In the literature on help-seeking across fields of health and welfare, researchers make frequent reference to stage models of help-seeking. Stage models offer generic representations of help-seeking processes and suggest help-seeking as a process which commences *prior* to service entry (Darley & Latane, 1970; Srebnik et al., 1996; McMullen and Gross, 1990). Help-seekers have a number of options in the face of problems to do with child-welfare, which do not necessarily result in seeking help from formal services. The question such models pose is: how can research capture such processes, the work *prior to* formal service entry? Currently research offers few insights into how help-seeking choices are managed as socially organised activities. In this project I decided to take up this challenge and without treating resources as *a priori* analytic categories.

In this study I propose that one can take the familiar research materials of social scientific ‘methods’, but look differently at these materials. Taking as a focus talk-in-interaction I suggest that one way of gaining insights into the kinds of inter-

⁹ Baccus (1986) refers to the procedures of conventional social research which use ‘signs’ or ‘indices’ to reference the social world. I return to this point in the discussion at the end of this chapter.

subjective or socially organised understandings which influence decisions about help-seeking is to focus on categorisation work. Whilst it is clearly not possible to directly extrapolate from talk about 'help-seeking' to help-seeking behaviour, in examining situated decision-making, new insights can be drawn that can then frame fresh avenues of research enquiry. The approach I take in this thesis, is therefore, to take the familiar research materials and rather than looking for the 'what' of help-seeking preferences, to look instead at *how* social actors invoke, make relevant, agree, select, one category of help-provider over another. To put this more simply, rather than pose a question such as 'where would you first seek help?' and then look to *what* answers are given, such as 'my mother', look at *how*, in those same conversations, the category 'mother' is made relevant or achieves the status of an adequate response. Analytic attention thus focuses on the inter-subjective resources that provide, for example, for the selection of 'my mother' as opposed to 'my social worker'. In taking this approach, this is not to suggest any superior vantage point, or desire to offer anything over and above conventional sociological approaches, but rather to suggest an alternative which draws attention to the frequently neglected organising properties of reasoning and communicative interaction.

As the following chapters will reveal, this study is concerned with the methods social actors deploy in making decisions in relation to the topic help-seeking in situated talk; in taking an epistemic focus, the work of ordering, prioritising, selecting, judging, deciding and so forth is of analytic interest. To take this alternative approach to 'conventional data' and enquiring into the *detail* of practical reasoning, is with a view to raising new avenues of enquiry about help-seeking.

This work is clearly influenced by the literature commonly referred to as ethnomethodology. Whilst ethnomethodology's programme continues to remain as an uncomfortable and frequently misunderstood non-mainstream branch of sociology, in my experience, once an appreciation of ethnomethodology's perspective has been even in part gained, a retreat back to the familiar camp of conventional sociology is difficult. Thus I found myself in the summer of 2003, sitting with a corpus of conventional data and considering the way forward.

Finding 'a descriptive apparatus'¹⁰

Sitting as many research students do with a whole batch of data, and trying to work out how to proceed on the basis of what was interesting about the data, rather than what had been originally spelled out in an early methodology chapter, I began to consider how this corpus of data, collected in conventional research settings of interview and focus group, might contribute to something different. From my early analysis of transcripts of data, I noticed that in both interviews and focus groups, in questioning participants about sources of help for family problems which impact on the care of children, I was taken into (and participated in) the *work* of choosing between, selecting and categorising different categories of help. In the focus groups I noted, for example, that when participants were asked "Is there a problem in this family that they need help with?" that this was not something that could be answered 'straight off'.¹¹ Rather, in many instances, this required further work on the part of

¹⁰ This expression is used throughout this thesis and is taken from Sacks (1966, 1992).

¹¹ This expression is from Sacks (1992). Sacks uses the expression 'straight off' to mean -without elaboration. He used the expression 'straight off' to describe expressions which when stated, encounter little challenge or calls to account from co-conversationists; these are expressions that are routinely treated as sufficient (non-treatable, non-repairable). Thus, when something *cannot* be said straight off this is observable in requests from co-conversationists to elaborate, or clarify.

participants of formulating the problem, evaluating sources of help and then making relevant one form of help over another. It was not, for example, that a participant could simply name the problems - "that's child abuse" or "that's a child in need"- and then decide on a category of help. Rather, the process of deciding that an individual required outside help was more complex and involved significant practical reasoning as displayed in matching, inferring, judging, prioritising, agreeing and so forth. Thus, I had before me a rich volume of material presenting *in situ* practical reasoning.

Whilst my intention was to 'unpack' the work of choosing between sources of help in talk-in-interaction, I needed some way of doing this 'unpacking'. At this point in the work, my desire to proceed in this way with the data was greatly aided by reading the work of Harvey Sacks, both his early thesis 'Search for Help' (1966) and his subsequent lectures (1992). In Sacks's thesis 'Search for Help', he studied calls between callers and staff at an emergency psychiatric clinic and suggested a normative order to help-seeking which provided for the suicidal person's problem of 'no one to talk to'. In this thesis Sacks provides a 'tool-box'¹², for unpacking practical reasoning. Sacks's focus is on categorisation work and how in everyday situations of both lay and scientific reasoning, individuals make use of categories to get done the business of daily conduct.

Sacks's central critique of 'conventional' sociology rests on his view that no category, of sociological description or any description, should be used in such a

¹² Sacks (1966) offered his work as a descriptive tool-box. He emphasised in his thesis that his work was not theoretical but rather offered some descriptive tools.

manner as to neglect the common-sense ways in which social actors (members¹³) themselves use it for practical purposes. For Sacks, sociologists 'get away with' using unexplicated categories such as 'gender' or 'race' or 'ethnicity' or 'class', and miss the situated work of categorisation. For Sacks, categorisation of persons is central to practical reasoning - processes of judging, deciding, inferring, assessing or comparing, rely on and depend on *categorisation work*. As the following chapters will show, by drawing on Sacks's work I was able to gain an understanding that categorisation of persons is central to practical reasoning. Taking categorisation as a focus, I was able to further delimit and unpack participants' decision-making work, arising reflexively in response to questions about help-seeking. Taking this approach, as the following chapters will illustrate, depends on a detailed focus on contextual relevance,'¹⁴ examining how certain categories are made relevant in and through particular courses of action.

Whilst Sacks's work has been of interest to methodologists with a particular interest in ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA), his particular insights on the social organisation of obligations to provide or seek help, have failed to gain the interest of researchers working in broader fields of health and social welfare. The aim of this thesis is to illustrate how Sacks's insights in 'Search for Help' and the conceptual apparatus of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), can be applied to situated conversations on the topic of help-seeking, thus, eliciting insights of relevance to questions about help-seeking and child-welfare.

¹³ Ethnomethodological studies use the word 'member' meaning member of society - whilst I take a methodological approach inspired by Sacks I have opted to refer to research 'participants' to include all parties to talk; recruited participants and the researcher alike.

¹⁴ Watson talks of contextual relevance (1997). In using this expression Watson is highlighting the sequential and categorical nature of talk.

As this work unfolds, the reader will be introduced to Sacks's conceptual framework of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), with practical illustrations of how this descriptive apparatus can provide a technology for 'unpacking' processes of practical reasoning (chapter 2). My work also draws heavily on the work of Hester and Eglin (1997) who have developed Sacks's original work of MCA and offered an *occasioned* model of MCA.

Standpoint, reflexivity and conventional social science

The approach I take in this work is clearly inspired by ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodological studies are, however, diverse and in particular, different authors take a different standpoint in relation to ethnomethodology's critical stance on conventional social science. Explicit in the work of Sacks (1966, 1992) and many others, such as Zimmerman and Pollner (1990), is a direct criticism of the 'common-sense perspective'¹⁵ of conventional sociology. Explicit in much ethnomethodological writing is a desire to get *beyond* the common-sense perspective. Sacks, for example, aimed to make a science out of sociology via close readings of data, indeed his whole technology of MCA was based on a desire to get *beyond* sociologists' use of unexplicated categories. Ethnomethodological studies have long espoused aspirations towards being 'a natural observational science' and whilst Sacks's toolbox is central to this thesis and indeed work is particularly influenced by his thesis 'Search for help', this work follows Lynch (1993), in espousing a post-analytic standpoint¹⁶.

¹⁵ Detailed explication of the 'common-sense perspective' can be found in chapter 3.

¹⁶ Lynch's articulation of a post-analytic standpoint can be found in his book 'Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action' (1993). Lynch argues that the task for the analyst is to approach social phenomena as 'patchworks of orderliness' rather than seek any overarching transcendental vantage point.

A key philosophical difficulty for ethnomethodologists is that in understanding what Lynch refers to as the unavoidable *reflexivity* of accounts, for the sociologists there can be no time out from this perspective. Sociologists, working in whatever camp of sociological thought, using whatever methods of social scientific accounting, cannot secure a viewpoint, or lens, outside their position or perspective. As Barnes and Law write,

‘we must regard the practice of ethnomethodology itself as beyond justification in any other than a circular way which involves its own practice as a criterion of judgement’ (Barnes and Law, 1976, p236).

The feminist researcher, for example, might trade in the language of gender or power or inequality and the quantitative researcher might trade in the language of correlation, statistic or significance, but what both share in common is the *reflexivity* of accounts; that is, that the meaning of their accounts arises from the particular camp in which the researcher is located. It is in and through the researcher’s location and association with a particular research tradition that the meaning of the account is achieved. Lynch offers the following description of reflexivity:

‘Sociological descriptions are endogenous to the fields of action that professional sociologists investigate, and then such descriptions are reflexive to the settings in which they originate. Even if they inadequately represent “society”, or some part of “society”, such accounts contribute to the discourse and actions in particular scenes’ (Lynch, 1993, p16).

Wattam succinctly captures this notion of reflexivity, citing Baccus (1986) who argues that the analyst of culture 'can only know where to look via his association with the culture' (1996, p9). Thus in this work, whilst in chapter 1, for example, I draw attention to the fact that the majority of studies of help-seeking conform to the conventions of constructive analysis, this is not with the intent of securing a transcendental vantage point 'outside the vernacular of ordinary language use', but rather with the aim of drawing attention to what constructive analysis leaves out (Lynch, 1993, p309). In taking from Sacks, his seminal work on Membership Categorisation Analysis, this has less to do with aligning myself to an overarching metaperspective or 'natural observational science' and more to do with making use of techniques of analysis which provide for the unpacking of situated reasoning. Work takes from the ethnomethodology's critique of the common-sense perspective a disappointment in the looseness of conventional social sciences analysis of the social world, but at the same time retains a sense of the irredeemable reflexivity of social scientific accounts.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of ten chapters. Chapters 1 - 4 provide the context for the study and describe the analytic frameworks and tools. In **Chapter 1** a review of the generic literature on help-seeking is provided, drawing literature from across fields of health and welfare. In **Chapter 2** a descriptive overview of the research materials is provided, describing processes of sampling, data collection, recording, transcribing and ethical considerations. **Chapter 3** provides an accessible overview

of ethnomethodology and MCA discussing how these analytic frameworks provide both a method and standpoint for exploring decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking', in focus group and interview talk. In **Chapter 4** the analytic tools and conceptual apparatus of MCA are introduced in some detail with applied illustrations. Chapters 5 - 9 present the substantive data analysis and findings. **Chapter 10** discusses the implications of the findings presented and makes a number of recommendations for the development of family support services.

The language and concepts of ethnomethodology and in particular Sacks's descriptive apparatus of MCA are frequently experienced as dense and inaccessible. Over the course of the following chapters every effort is made by way of explication and accompanying footnotes to engage the reader in the sense of and logic of this work. Consideration is given to the audience for this work and that members of that audience may not have detailed knowledge about ethnomethodology's programme.

My thesis is that analysis of the accountable properties of decision-making in interview and focus group talk in relation to the topic 'help-seeking' finds decision making a highly socially organised activity, such that any social actor can make an educated guess about which category another would select first for help. The following chapters present the detail of how decision-making is inter-subjectively organised, suggesting a normative and moral order to help-seeking. Whilst it is not possible to directly generalise from the data presented in the following chapters to help-seeking behaviour in diverse contexts, analysis of situated talk offers alternative avenues of enquiry for future research, adding to the knowledge base in the field of child welfare. In the concluding chapter of the thesis I suggest alternative

ways forward for practice and research that may enable health and social care providers to tailor their services more appropriately than they are currently able, on the basis of the extant literature on help-seeking.

Chapter 1

Reviewing the generic literature on help-seeking

Introduction

Interest in the topic of 'help-seeking' has only recently emerged as an avenue of inquiry in relation to services designed to safeguard children and support families (Redmond et al., 2002; Broadhurst, 2003). Across broader fields of health and welfare, help-seeking is a familiar topic of research activity and has generated a substantial body of literature. In the fields of mental health, substance abuse, and disability, for example, the topic of help-seeking has attracted considerable research interest (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Thom, 1986; Ciarrochi and Deane, 2001; Tsogia et al., 2001; Meltzor et al., 2000; Fox et al., 2001; Angermeyer et al., 2005; Jakobsson et al., 2005).

Across fields of health and welfare, studies of help-seeking have tended to focus on help-seeking from *formal* services. Questions about how, why and at what point an individual chooses to seek help from professional services have dominated. A central concern which frames the majority of research is that individuals who are deemed to need help fail to seek help from available *professional* services, preferring informal sources of support (Meehan et al., 1992; Raviv et al., 2000; Ciarrochi and Deane, 2001; Harris et al., 2001). Given this central interest, the majority of studies have examined a range of factors which are suggested as having an impact on patterns of formal service use. Factors such as 'social class',

'ethnicity', 'social networks' or 'gender', have all been consistently postulated as having an impact on patterns of formal service use (Pavuluri et al., 1996; Hoard and Anderson, 2004; Sears 2004). In addition, studies have sought to explore the meaning which social actors attach to seeking help from formal services, suggesting that help-seeking is associated with 'stigma' or 'embarrassment' (Esters et al., 1998; Hoyt et al., 2004). A further sub-set of literature has centred on the relationship between 'problem definition' and service use (Pavuluri et al., 1996; Faver et al., 1999; Barry et al., 2000; Fuller et al., 2000).

Studies have frequently reported under-utilisation of formal services and raised questions of whether services are suitably organised to facilitate appropriate help-seeking behaviour. Hartnoll, writing in the field of mental health, makes the following observation:

'If only a small proportion of people in need of help actually seek help, treatment and rehabilitation, services are very imperfectly achieving their purpose' (Hartnoll, 1992, p429).

Walters et al., (2001) writing on the subject of older adults state that:

'Decades of community-based research into the health needs of older people have consistently shown extensive unmet need in older age groups' (Walters, 2001, p277).

Claims about under-utilisation of formal services have frequently been based on equations drawn between epidemiological survey findings and patterns of service use (Meltzor et al., 2000; Ciarrochi and Deane, 2001).

Studies in the field of family support¹⁷, which have taken the topic of help-seeking as a focus, are both scant and limited, focusing specifically on patterns of *referral* to formal services (Gibbons, 1990; Oakley, 1998; Vulliamy et al., 2000). The dearth of studies specific to family support has in part arisen as a consequence of the organisation of family support services; families have tended to enter services following third party referral and thus questions about help-seeking have had little organisational relevance. The shift in focus in recent years towards the development of 'family-friendly' services which aim to stimulate *self*-referral from target communities has, however, prompted questions about help-seeking (Broadhurst 2003). Evaluative studies of new family-friendly initiatives indicate that there are on-going concerns about the up-take of such services. Findings from patterns of service use suggest that use is gendered (Pithouse and Holland, 1999; Daniel and Taylor, 1999; Armstrong and Hill, 2001) and that there are problems of reaching some of the most vulnerable families (Wattam, 1997; Oakley, 1998; Colclough, 1999; Macdonald and Williamson, 2002; Spratt and Callan, 2004). Post the 'marketisation' of family support services there are equally concerns about how the potential help-seeker negotiates entry to services and the relationship between informal and formal support (Pugh et al., 1994; Oakley et al., 1998; Petrie and Wilson, 1999; Morris and Shepherd, 2000; Hallett et al., 2003).

¹⁷ Buchanan (2002) described family support as 'the 101 things that can be done by friends, neighbours and social care professionals to help families manage the essential task of bringing up children' (p253).

In this review of the generic literature on help-seeking I aim to provide an overview of selected studies which take help-seeking as a focus. Given the dearth of literature specific to family support, studies are drawn across a range of fields of health and welfare. All the studies reviewed in this chapter can be described as following in the familiar canons and descriptive apparatus of conventional social science. The review aims to highlight the parameters and limitations of existing research, drawing attention to how questions are formulated, inferences drawn and to the kinds of methodological concerns displayed in this literature.

Stage models of help-seeking

In beginning to consider and draw together the considerably diverse literature on help-seeking, a first observation is the pervasive influence of early stage models of help-seeking. Early stage models offered by such as Darley and Latane (1970), Keith-Lucas (1972) and Goldberg and Huxley (1980), are frequently cited and continue to hold a central place in more contemporary work (Greenlay & Mullen 1990; Pavuluri et al. 1996; Srebnik et al. 1996; Faver et al. 1999; Murray, 2005; Liang, 2005). Clearly there is variation between models, but, according to all these models, help-seeking is a process which can be divided up into a series of discrete stages. The following model from Darley and Latane (1970) is frequently referenced. Stages are named as:

1. Problem definition
2. Decision to seek help

3. Actively seeking help

Given the pervasive reference to this model, it has served, for the practical purposes of research activity, as an adequate approximation of the social phenomenon commonly known as 'help-seeking'. Whilst a number of authors have sought to improve or amend the above model, there has been little questioning of the value of generic representation¹⁸ itself. McMullen and Gross (1990), for example, have emphasised the 'inter-relationship' and 'non-linear movement' between stages, but have left intact the notion of help-seeking as a process which can be divided into generalised discrete stages. Greenlay and Mullen (1990) have amended the terminology of the stage model, referring to a 'stage process model'. However, suggestions are again remedial¹⁹ and worked within the boundaries of prior stage models of help-seeking.

Much recent research emanates from the early stage models, with many studies attempting to identify and quantify factors influencing help-seeker choice or activity between *stages* of the models. Thus, early stage models can be seen to have articulated the relevancies²⁰ for subsequent studies. For the purposes of this review

¹⁸ This concept is taken from Sacks (1963). Sacks used this expression in a paper titled 'On sociological description'. Sacks used the expression generic representation to refer to the accepted practice in sociological theorising of constructing explanations/formulations from particular observations of social phenomena and then treating such formulations as generically or trans-situationally relevant/applicable.

¹⁹ This expression is taken from Wattam (1996). Whilst sociologists might seek to improve on methods that have gone before, their 'improvements' are simply an elaboration of prior (established) practices. Sociologists, in their 'remedial' methods, continue to work within assumptive methodological ways of doing/knowing.

²⁰ This expression is used by Lynch (1991). Lynch discussed the topic of 'correspondence' and referred to a range of 'techniques through which geometric models mediate the interpretive relationship between theory and data' (1991, p77). Lynch stated that the construction of an 'interpreted diagram' or 'model' articulates 'the relevancies under which theoretical expressions are brought into correspondence with empirical properties' (1991, p77).

the literature emanating from the early stage models has been grouped around the following headings:

- Problem definition and help-seeking from formal services
- Demographic factors and help-seeking from formal services
- Psychological factors and help-seeking from formal services
- The role of informal support on help-seeking from formal services
- Service organisation and help-seeking

Problem definition and help-seeking

For many social scientists who have selected the topic of help-seeking as a focus of inquiry, the question of how an individual defines his or her own problems or needs has attracted considerable research attention (Zahner et al., 1992; Pavuluri et al., 1995; Arcia et al., 1998, 2002; Tsogia et al., 2001; Barry et al., 2000; Fuller et al., 2000). Researchers have indicated the importance of 'stage one' in understanding the help-seeking process. How an individual defines his or her problems is seen as having a significant impact on decisions to seek help from professional services. Several authors have suggested that lack of up-take of services is to do with the disparity between lay and professional 'problem definition'. A recurrent theme in this body of literature is that *lack of awareness* of 'problems' in lay populations, results in under-utilisation of services. For example, Tucker, writing in the field of mental health states,

‘Whether we consider minor medical problems, potentially serious ones, or major ones, there are always a very large number of people with serious problems who have not sought help with them. Many... are quite unaware of their disability and their lives are not infrequently totally disrupted by it’ (Tucker, 1995, p163).

Turning to more recent studies in the field of mental health, Meltzor et al., (2000) have suggested that ignorance of neurotic disorders in lay populations, impacts on the uptake of services. Similarly, in the field of substance misuse, Jordan and Oei (1989) write that problem recognition was the most influential factor for entry to drug and alcohol services.

In the field of family support, the issue of problem definition has received considerable attention, with the Department of Health (2000) indicating that ‘child abuse’ is a concept that is variously described and not subject to absolute definition. Pursuit of agreed thresholds and indeed the drive of much recent work on parenting, has been with the aim of increasing convergence between lay and professionals about what constitutes ‘good enough parenting’ or ‘harms to children’. The aim of this work has been to augment convergence of definition between diverse populations, with the aim of increasing appropriate reporting to formal agencies (DfES, 2003). Studies have tended to focus on a sub-set of parents labelled ‘maltreating’ and particular concerns have been expressed about this group in relation to problem definition and use of formal services (Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979; Atteberry-Bennett, 1987; Portwood, 1999). For example,

‘maltreating parents do not often identify themselves as having a problem and are usually not self-referred for evaluation or treatment’ (Hansen and Warner, 1994, p1).

More recently, Faver et al., (1999) claimed that ‘maltreating’ parents posed particular challenges for service delivery as,

‘maltreating families often do not recognise the development of problems in the parenting relationship’ (Faver et al., 1999, p89).

In pursuing insights into a postulated difference between lay and professional ‘definitions’, it is possible to identify a number of discernible methodological approaches which characterise this body of literature. First, there are a number of studies which have sought to examine how lay versus professional populations *rate or score*, severity of ‘problems’. These studies have taken agency or professional definitions of problems as a baseline or marker and then compared service user or lay definitions against these baselines (Greenlay and Mullen, 1990; Portwood, 1999; Tsogia et al., 2000; Meltzor et al., 2000; Cirakoglu and Isin, 2005). A second body of literature has sought to examine how problems are differently *labelled or named* (Rogler and Cortes, 1993; Fuller al., 2000; Penn and Gough, 2002). A third body of literature has centred on exploring *processes* of problem construction (Arcia et al., 1998; Heenan, 2000). In all studies, research is worked as if there is a *universal* definition or an *a priori* attribution of meaning by the individual concerned, or symptoms that should be recognised as ‘problematic’. Studies aim to offer insights about how universal or common definitions can be achieved.

Within the literature specific to family support and despite the acknowledgement that both child maltreatment and children's needs are subject to variable definition, the use of *a priori* formulations of 'problems' continues as a key methodological tool in both research and practice. Axford et al., (2005) write:

'There are several methods for segmenting a study population. First taxonomies such as DSM-IV and ICD-10 give some specificity to disorder in child development; secondly services apply strict eligibility criteria and so serve narrow groups' (Axford et al., 2005, p75).

Portwood (1999) investigated lay definitions of child abuse. Portwood's interest lay in establishing the impact of 'social and individual value judgements' upon definitions of child maltreatment (p56). Portwood, however, commenced with a combination of direct questions and vignettes *professionally assessed* as depicting levels of maltreatment. Participants were asked to rate acts or incidents in terms of 'levels' of maltreatment, using a seven-point scale. The author concluded that a consensus existed between professional and lay definition of child maltreatment. Given this finding, the author concluded with optimistic inferences about the likelihood of appropriate lay-referral to child protection agencies. The findings from this study conflict, however, with findings from prior studies. For example, Daro and Gelles (1992) conducted a study in which the authors found that whilst public opinion about physical punishment was moving towards convergence with professional opinion, understandings about emotional abuse significantly diverged. The authors concluded that this was a worrying finding and recommended

‘continued efforts to provide public awareness and public education’ (p517). Similarly, in a key finding from Pavaluri et al., (1996) was that ‘major blocks to help-seeking’ were to do with ‘parents recognising the presence of a problem’ (p215). Studies which focus on child maltreatment and definitions of child abuse continue to report findings which are inconclusive, concerning the level of divergence and convergence between lay and professional ratings of child maltreatment.

Meltzor et al., (2000) writing in the field of mental health and taking a similar methodological approach, focused on ‘reluctance’ to seek help for ‘neurotic disorders’ (2000, p319). Taking a population of individuals who were identified as ‘neurotic’ from a National Household Survey based on ICD-10²¹ diagnostic criteria, the study established that the majority of these individuals did not seek help from designated mental health services. A number of reasons for this were suggested by the authors, that included ‘ignorance’ of neurotic disorders (p325). The researchers argued that ‘lay views’ diverged considerably from ‘psychiatric experts’ diagnosis’ (p327). The authors concluded with pessimistic inferences about appropriate lay-referral to professional agencies, stating that this was a case of ‘unmet need’ and a major public health problem (p319). In contrast, in a further study in the field of mental health by Angermeyer et al., (2001), the authors presented vignettes, validated by ‘expert’ diagnostic opinion and perceived as depicting a person either suffering schizophrenia or depression. The authors reported that in the lay population sampled, participants had no problem in identifying a serious mental health problem and that this required expert help.

²¹ International Classification of Diseases.

The above studies present inconclusive findings in relation to divergence between lay and professional definitions of problems in two contrasting fields of health and welfare.

There is a further subset of literature in which researchers have attempted to address the perceived limitations of such studies which commence with *a priori* formulations of problems. Pilgrim and Rogers (1997) argued that studies which commence with *a priori* definitions or formulations of needs or problems are not only framed from the dominant perspective of official or professional discourse, but in addition fail to fully exploit a relativist approach. Writing in the field of mental health, they argued that studies which commence from received or official discourses of problems, in attributing authority to official discourse in this way, miss the perspective of *lay* populations. In criticising the dominance of professional discourse in both mental health research and practice, the authors stated that 'new mental health practices' were 'predicated on pre-existing psychiatric or clinical psychological frameworks', with professionals not having 'checked their construct or face validity against the understandings of ordinary people' (1997, p24). They proposed that research needed to move beyond the dominant or official discourse of mental health, towards an exploration of the 'meanings' that lay populations attach to mental health problems. Suggestions to improve on prior research were framed in terms of remedial methods such as open-ended questions or 'avoidance of constructs pre-defined by researchers' (p24). Such methods were seen as a way of getting beyond the dominance of professional discourse, thus allowing the researcher to elicit greater understandings about the constructs of 'ordinary' people (p24).

In a similar vein Penn and Gough (2002) sought to compare the 'meaning' attached to family support in professional and target populations. 'Meaning', for practical purposes, was described as the names, labels or other descriptors that professionals and lay populations attached to 'problems'. The authors concluded that an on-going conceptual divide was evident between professional perspectives and those of the target population. The researchers found that whilst professionals tended to 'operate within a narrow, historically determined range, focusing most heavily on emotional support and behavioural change' (p17), service users were more likely to highlight issues of 'income maintenance, childcare, leisure and education' (p17). In identifying different categories of problems in use, such as 'money problems' or 'emotional needs', the authors concluded that this critical difference between lay and professional definitions had important implications for utilisation of services. Whilst it might be argued that this second sub-set of literature attempts to remedy limitations of the first sub-set of literature, central to this second set is a similar epistemological commitment to achieving *universal* definition (an agreed version of 'problems' which transcends context). In addition, both subsets deal with 'end points' of definitional processes, finite products of practical reasoning²².

There are a number of studies which represent more recent trends in social constructionist research, in that research foregrounds *processes* of problem 'construction'. In common with other qualitative studies, these studies have also suggested a critical difference between lay and professional discourse. However, the focus is on *how* an individual arrives at a definition of problems or needs.

²² Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) have dealt with this ontological inconsistency which typifies much social constructionist literature.

In 1998, Arcia et al., conducted a study that focused on help-seeking in Cuban-American mothers with children diagnosed as ADHD²³. The authors aimed to explore differences in knowledge and understandings about ADHD between mothers and health-care professionals. Mothers were referred to as 'the gatekeepers' to services, indicating that it was how mothers defined problems that determined how, when and why they would ask for help. Again, this study placed central importance on lay definition of problems in understanding help-seeking behaviour. In this study researchers stated that the definition of problems was socially constructed and that the authors intended to explore the *detail* of this difference. For practical purposes, detail was framed as 'schemas' with the authors drawing on the terminology of cognitive psychology. The researchers drew on a sample of seven mothers, recruited using flyers posted in health centres. They aimed to include mothers in the study who were 'in the process of developing a schema of ADHD' (p335). Throughout the study and trading in the familiar terminology of cognitive psychology, the authors made reference to process in terms of 'schemas' 'codifications' or 'constructs'. Schemas, defined as 'an individual's cognitive codification of experience' (p334), were hypothesised as influencing help-seeking behaviour. *Process* of definition formation was seen to consist of interaction between mothers' own knowledge, culturally available understandings and professional knowledge. Process was, therefore, described at the level of the received categories of 'culture' 'schema' 'experience'. In common with the larger body of literature on help-seeking and problem definition, the study concluded with concerns regarding uptake of professional services. Mothers were found to approach

²³ Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

professional services when they arrived at an understanding that their children's behaviour was outside 'the normal range' (p346).

There are only a limited number of studies which seek to elicit process; these studies are useful in highlighting processes of problem formation, rather than simply *condensing* the work of problem formation into 'definition'. There are, however, few studies following Arcia et al., and hence the dominant methodological trend in all this literature is towards search for, and use of, 'end- point' definitions. It is also possible to conclude that Arcia et al., trading in the official language of cognitive psychology, simply substitute one form of received discourse with another, again theorising problem formation *a priori*.

The findings across fields of health and welfare present competing and inconclusive results regarding any differences between lay and professional definitions of problems or needs. Where one study seems to suggest convergence, another suggests divergence. It is, however, possible to identify some distinct commonalities between the majority of studies in terms of epistemological and methodological commitments. Whilst studies might differ in terms of the methods and terminology (for example authors may make reference to 'meaning' or 'perspective' as opposed to 'definition') the majority are premised on the notion of 'problems' as finite or stable entities, with an 'out there reality'. The work of problem formation is condensed into 'definition'. Studies are driven by a common goal of increasing convergence between lay and professional 'definitions' to increase appropriate help-seeking behaviour. The majority of studies retain an aspiration towards *universal* definition. Solutions which follow the epistemological commitments of this body of

literature centre on either individual or national health campaigns which aim to educate lay populations about the 'real' nature or 'symptomatology' of problems.

Demographic factors and help-seeking

'Economic, political and societal divisions and inequalities have been recognised as real, as well as imagined barriers obstructing the process of help-providing and receiving' (Kanaisty and Norris, 2000, p546).

There are a number of studies which have focused on the impact of 'demography' upon the help-seeking process. The focus of this body of literature is on formal service use, with the predominance of studies exploring the demographic composition of *service user* populations. The literature focusing on demographic factors and help-seeking posits a relationship between the category concepts which are frequently used to transact the business of variable analysis, such as 'social class', 'gender', 'ethnicity' or 'educational' or 'occupational status', and use of formal services. Research has sought to identify, for example, a relationship between 'social class' and formal service use. Across the literature there is a proliferation of studies which have taken this focus (Nadler, 1984, 1987; Feehan et al., 1990; Tucker, 1995; Pottick et al., 1992; Hser et al., 1998; Sears, 2004). Studies conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s reflect the quantitative orientation of much social scientific work and are typified by the search for correlates of help-seeking behaviour (Feehan et al., 1990; Jensen et al., 1990; Cohen, 1990). In the literature specific to family support, given the consistent finding that predominantly single, female-headed households receiving state benefit are users of *formal* services, the

subject of demography has also drawn research interest (Gibbons, 1990; Redmond et al., 2002).

Gibbons (1990) focused on the demographic characteristics of users of local authority social services and concluded that low socio-economic status correlated with service use. However, the study did not distinguish between self-referral and third-party or professional referral. Hence, it is difficult to infer a relationship between demography, help-seeking and service use from this study. The findings from Thorpe 1994 suggest bias in reporting of concerns about children, with increased reporting to social services of children living in conditions of socio-economic disadvantage.

In contrast to Gibbons, a study by Fuller et al., (2000) interviewed lay populations directly and asked questions about help-seeking. Fuller et al., focused on *male* populations and mental health promotion in rural communities. The rationale for the study was concern about rising levels of suicide in young males in farming communities. A large selection of residents, drawn from four rural communities was included in the study, accessed via the researcher calling at households. The study used both questionnaire and vignette methods. The authors reported significant differences in responses in relation to demographic groups, with men under 40 and with 'lower levels of education' significantly less concerned with 'current levels of depression and suicide' and access to services. Men were also found to be 'less likely to confide in others about emotional matters' (p302). The authors concluded with suggestions to improve appropriate help-seeking, commenting on the relationship between help-seeking and demographic factors, including age, gender

and educational status. In contrast to Gibbons, in asking lay populations directly about help-seeking, the authors are able to make what might be viewed as more valid conclusions about help-seeking and demography. However, when the findings from Fuller et al are considered in relation to further studies in the field of mental health, findings are conflicting and inconclusive. In a study by Tucker (1995), the relationship between demography and treatment uptake for alcohol misuse was studied. The authors found no correlation between the selected variables. In contrast Feehan et al., (1990) found a relationship between 'low' socio-economic status and increased service use for children with emotional and behavioural disorders.

All studies are worked within the parameters of variable analysis and presuppose the discreteness and stability of variables such as 'social class', 'ethnicity' or 'gender'. Whilst this methodology is part and parcel of the reflexive practice of variable analysis, this methodology affords few insights into *how* social class, for example, is relevant to help-seeking; the relationship between variable and topic is secured²⁴ by the analyst *a priori*. Where any critical discourse exists in this literature, this relates to *remedial* suggestions to improve the predictive value of correlates. These suggestions have been variously stated as better or larger samples, more representative samples, better methods of analysis or improved methods to ensure isolation of key variables. For example, Hallett et al., (2003) argued that the literature on help-seeking was based on adult populations only, with a neglect of the perspective of young people. The authors claimed that their study remedied this neglect by sampling from populations of young men and young women from a specified age group, using 'child-centred' methods of data collection. For those such

²⁴ Benson and Hughes (1991) refer to 'measurement by fiat', from Togerson (1958); I take this up further in the discussion of this chapter.

as Hallett et al., the remedy lies in sampling from the neglected 'category'; they find no problems with the methods of variable analysis *per se*.

As is typical of 'variable' analysis²⁵, studies have continued to trade in the language of received categories of social science, without any question or call for their explication. The acceptance of the stability of such categories not only frames studies, but equally supports policy and practice decisions that certain population groups should be targeted with resources. Acceptance of homogenous target groups, described in terms of the categories of 'men', 'women', 'children', 'Asians' and so forth, allows those 'identified problem groups' to be targeted with awareness campaigns and companion services, in order to increase appropriate help-seeking from formal services. Targeted health and welfare services are now part and parcel of the welfare landscape, with few questions raised about the validity of this organisation.

The role of informal support on help-seeking behaviour

Studies of help-seeking have taken for granted and are organised around a distinction between 'informal' and 'formal' support; with the majority of research as stated, focusing on *formal* service use. The most consistent finding across the literature, in diverse fields of health and social welfare, is that help-seekers prefer informal support (Gray et al., 1997; Meltzor et al., Anderson et al., 2000; Mitchell and Green, 2002; Raviv, 2003). This finding has fuelled concerns about the under-

²⁵ Benson and Hughes (1991), offer a fuller critique of variable analysis in Button G (Ed.) *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences*, pp109-136.

utilisation of formal services and has led to a number of studies investigating the relationship between informal, formal support and help-seeking.

In relation to services designed to safeguard children and support families, studies have frequently reported a correlation between impoverished networks and use of formal services (Garbarino and Sherman, 1983; Gibbons, 1990; Frost et al., 2000). Interest in social networks has largely centred on analysis of the social networks of *service user* populations, which suggest that those with 'impoverished' networks are more likely to use formal services. A number of studies found that families with 'less supportive' networks were more likely to come into contact with family support services (Garbarino and Sherman, 1980; Whittaker and Garbarino, 1983; Gibbons et al., 1990; Cooley, 1996). Frost et al., (2000) found that families using Home-Start were likely to be experiencing network deficiencies, with a number of referred families experiencing network transition, such as divorce and separation. From such observations of *formal* service populations authors have drawn the *inference* that informal networks are protective; that is supportive networks mediate against the need for formal support or intervention. The relationship between networks and formal service use is, however, not straightforward and a key study by Oakley et al., (1998) is illustrative.

Oakley et al., (1998) studied families referred to two voluntary sector providers of family support, Home-Start and New-Pin. The authors reported that many families were referred due to problems of depression, social isolation and not coping with children, stating that a key need was 'someone to talk to' (p322). Oakley et al., write, however, that even though families presented as lacking in supportive

relationships, there was a significant problem of 'non-use' of support services post referral. In New-Pin, only one in ten families referred became 'significantly involved' (p325); in Home-Start one in three. There were a variety of factors which impacted on non-engagement, to do with the appropriateness of referral and timing, but the authors also claimed that a proportion of referred families did not want the help offered. The researchers also pointed to limitations in their data, due to problems of 'hard to reach' families who were inaccessible to researchers:

'just as the organisations themselves had problems of accessing 'hard to reach' groups, so we as researchers found it difficult to obtain data from some of the more socially disadvantaged families who had been referred and whom we knew from referral records, to be less likely to have become users' (Oakley et al., 1998, p328).

The findings from Oakley et al., concur with earlier findings from Pavuluri et al., (1996) who found that families with higher levels of need or more serious problems, were often *less* likely to seek help. Such findings suggest that somehow the continuum from lack of informal relationships to engagement with formal relationships is not straightforward and there continues to be some relevance which evades researchers. Whilst studies illustrate that families using family support services have less supportive networks, it is not possible to state that poor support networks are 'causal' of *help-seeking* from formal services, even if this is a desired outcome of such studies.

A key limitation of studies which have sought to explore the relationship between informal and formal support (generic rather than specific to the family support literature) is that although there are consistent findings that individuals prefer informal support, there are few studies directly of *how* that works. The predominance of studies which focus on the networks of service-user populations leaves important questions about how the networks of those *outside* of services function so as to be protective.

The trend towards evaluative studies across health and welfare in recent years has resulted in an even greater research emphasis on formal service use. Studies have tended to explore *formal* service delivery of 'social support', rather than informal support *per se*. In the field of child-welfare, whilst there are a number of older studies which have pointed to the importance of social support in relation to emotional well-being in informal networks (see, for example, Brown and Harris (1978), Barrera (1986), Cohen and Wills (1985) or Lazarus and Folkman (1984)) the current trend in child-welfare research is on *formal* service evaluation. Grey et al., (1997) for example, studied 'befriending' delivered by family support workers. Others such as Jordan (2000) have concluded that informal sources of support tend to be more effective than formal sources. However, the almost exclusive focus on formal services leaves the relationship between informal support and help-seeking unexplored.

In the broader literature on help-seeking the protective function of the social network has also been considered (Pescosolido, 1992; Tucker, 1995; Barry et al., 2000; Van Hook, 2000; Tsogia et al., 2001), with the majority of studies identifying

the importance of the social network as a source of informal support (Rogler and Cortes, 1993; Srebnik et al., 1996; Fuller et al., 2000). Whilst there are a greater number of studies which have taken the informal network as a focus, these studies have largely centred on the 'structural' aspects of networks, attempting to identify network types and make-up. Typologies of social networks are variously categorised as 'poor', 'dense', 'enmeshed' and so forth. Powell and Eisenstadt (1983), in a comparative study of rural and urban network patterns, coined the notion of 'parochial' versus 'cosmopolitan' network types. Rogler and Cortes (1993) commented that there were 'promising' and 'plausible' findings from the research that 'close-knit' networks, where individuals had a high level of interconnectedness, were associated with less help-seeking from formal sources. Heenan (2000) also suggested from her study of rural communities, that 'close-knit' networks could be equated with decreased help-seeking from formal services. Such findings are, however, called into question given the problems with precise quantification of social networks and the now well rehearsed arguments arising from the post-positivist critique (Bishop and Leadbeater, 1999).

Within the broader literature there is a further sub-set of literature, although not substantive, in which questions have been asked about the role of the social network in *referral* to formal services. However, interest in lay referral networks again reflects the central focus of studies on formal services. A number of studies have centred on the function of the lay network in relation to transmission of norms and values of help-seeking from formal services. Beckman and Amaro (1986), considered the impact of family members in terms of encouraging a drug-using female to seek help. Thom (1986) was interested in the impact of 'significant others'

upon entry to alcohol treatment services and found that men were more likely to enter treatment for alcohol dependence as a consequence of influence from female partners. In 1992, Pescosolido observed that help-seeking had often been seen in the literature as a matter of individual decision-making and proposed an alternative framework that conceptualised help-seeking decision-making as embedded in the social network. Angermeyer et al., (2001) conducted a study in Germany which aimed to identify the order in which the help-seeker approached 'agents' in the lay support network, versus professionals for help about mental health problems. The findings from Angermeyer's study suggest that friends are the preferred source of support in the lay support network and in the professional network, the family physician. This second body of literature is useful in that it attempts to explore *how* the social networks function in relation to help-seeking.

Common to the literature specific to family support and across broader fields of health and welfare, is a distinction between informal versus formal support as an *a priori* organising device. In commencing from this framework, interest in 'informal' sources has, in the majority of studies, only gained relevance in relation to interest in *formal* support. Aspects of informal sources which thus have become visible are those aspects which have been seen as relevant to formal services (for example, lay *referral* processes). In addition help-seeking decision-making is simply condensed into a matter of choosing between a professional versus non-professional source.

A contemporary study which stands out from this literature is that of Ghate and Hazel (2002), and this study therefore warrants more detailed consideration. Ghate and Hazel (2002) explored 'Stress, Support and Coping' in poor neighbourhoods.

The study comprised a focused analysis of diverse sources of support, which they categorised as 'informal' 'semi-formal' and 'formal'. Part of the study was, therefore, a direct focus on informal support networks. The study took a qualitative approach and the authors were critical of network studies which have simply focused on the 'structural' aspects of informal networks, quantifying network size, frequency of contacts and so forth. Ghate and Hazel (2002), in contrast, attempted to explore the 'affiliative' aspects which they list as 'valence', 'reciprocity', 'homogeneity' and 'multi-functionality'. The findings from this study stand in contrast to prior studies that have suggested that poor neighbourhoods afford low levels of support. The authors concluded that only 3% of the population studies cited 'no one' to turn to:

'..most reported close-knit and warm relationships with their most important supporters in which family members and women played key roles' (Ghate and Hazel, 2002, p125).

Ghate and Hazel (2002) argued that their findings concurred with Tracey (1990), who found 'strong' networks, even in 'high risk' samples. They suggested, however, that high need may be attributable to lack of 'enactment of support' (p125). Whilst terms such as 'reciprocity' are part and parcel of the received language or common factual domain²⁶ of social theory, the researchers offer little by way of the empirical detail of reciprocity; rather the analysis achieves received categorical frameworks. The authors gloss the situated features of 'enactment' 'reciprocity' and so forth, which is symptomatic of this kind of qualitative analysis. Ghate and Hazel's

²⁶ This expression is from Zimmerman and Pollner (1990). I offer a fuller explication of this expression in the discussion of this chapter.

imposition and use of the received vocabulary of ‘valence’ or ‘multi-functionality’, whilst part and parcel of the familiar discourse of social science, glosses the particulars of how informal networks are organised as situated action. The limitation of this conventional qualitative approach is that these received categories then stand prior to any detailed analysis of the achievement of networks for particular purposes. Networks as co-produced and relevantly occasioned; is a feature of network ‘enactment’ that is missed by Ghate and Hazel. In addition, Ghate and Hazel’s study, like the majority of available studies of informal networks, focuses most exclusively on target populations (Ghate and Hazel draw on ‘poor families’) and this renders diverse populations outside the analyst’s gaze.

The research in this section seems to struggle to find a methodological approach which gets to the social organisation of help-seeking. Whilst ‘significant others’ or ‘the social network’ are seen as important or preferred, few insights are offered about how such preferences work *in situ*. The terminology of network studies, which trade in the familiar language of ‘reciprocity’ and so forth, whilst raising interesting questions, remains an authorised gloss on the detail of how networks function in relation to help-seeking and social support. Formal services may seek to deliver ‘befriending’, but rely on the category ‘friend’ as an unexplicated resource in labelling services thus. In addition, whilst the category collectivities ‘informal’/‘formal’ are clearly relevant for the research community or those who organise formal services, we know little of the relevancies which organise situated decision-making about diverse sources of help. This emerges as a significant omission in the literature, given that (i) studies consistently report that individuals prefer informal support and (ii) studies, particularly in family support, indicate no

straightforward relationship between absence of informal support and use of formal services.

Psychological aspects of help-seeking

‘The process of seeking and receiving aid is permeated by a variety of sociopsychological liabilities with their corollary aversive undertones often experienced as feelings of relative inferiority, indebtedness and lower self-esteem’ (Kanaisty and Norris, 2000, p546).

Questions of ‘stigma’, ‘control’, ‘trust,’ fear’ and ‘impact upon self-esteem’ have frequently appeared in the literature on help-seeking (Jorm et al., 2000; Barry et al., 2000; Van Hook, 2000; Heenan, 2000; Harris et al., 2001). Common to this body of literature is recourse to the familiar terminology of psychological theory, with cognate notions of ‘individual’ psychological processes as central.

A three-volume series edited by Depaulo et al., (1983) has provided much of the impetus for work on help-seeking and psychological aspects. Included in this collection are chapters which explore the relationship between ‘self-esteem’ and help-seeking (Rosen, 1983), the ‘social impact’ of help-seeking (Williams and Williams, 1983; Shapiro, 1983) and ‘ambivalence’ and the help-seeking process (Merton et al., 1983). This work is mainly concerned with help-seeking from *formal* services and is largely theoretical, offering little by way of empirical data. Merton et al., (1983), for example, theorised that ‘control’ in the help-seeking process is central to help-seeking. They argued that ‘ambivalence is characteristic’ of the help-seeking relationship; ambivalence is seen to arise out of both the inability on the part

of the help-seeker to participate in a relationship of mutual exchange and a sense of actual or potential loss of control. The work of Nadler (1984; 1985; 1987) is also frequently cited in this literature as highlighting the importance of the social impact of help-seeking.

Following this early work, the topic of stigma has drawn considerable research interest. Researchers across diverse fields of health and welfare have undertaken work on the relationship between stigma and help-seeking. Raviv et al., (2000) conducted a study of referral processes in the field of adolescent mental health. The researchers concluded that whilst respondents were willing to refer others for services, they were unwilling to make a self-referral. This study and others (Van Hook, 2000, Tsogia, 2000) add weight to Nadler's earlier claims that in order to understand help-seeking behaviour, the social impact of help-seeking needed to be considered. In the literature specific to family support there is a discernible body of literature concerned with the 'psychosocial' impact of *entry* to services designed to safeguard children and support families. A number of key studies, for example, have explored the experience of the service user receiving child protection services (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Colton et al.; 1997; Jack, 2000). Such studies have concluded that services are 'stigmatising' and impact negatively upon self-esteem. Recent developments in the provision of family-friendly services reflect these findings with a move towards the provision of less 'stigmatising', 'informal' and accessible services (Gray 2002; Pithouse and Holland, 1999).

Despite the move towards the provision of family-friendly services, studies continue to report that service users find family support provision ‘stigmatising’. Frost et al., (2000) found that a percentage of families declined Home-Start due to perceptions of ‘stigma’. In a more recent study by Spratt and Callan (2004), who sampled 12 families receiving ‘child-welfare’ (rather than child protection) interventions, the authors found overall ‘negative views of services’, with families particularly at initial referral stage demonstrating high levels of suspicion and concerns about stigma in response to services offered. Studies are limited, however, in terms of offering insights into how services might get beyond associations of ‘stigma’. The points I made in the section above, concerning researchers’ recourse to the familiar language of social research, are again relevant. Studies which trade in the authorised glosses of ‘self-esteem’, or ‘stigma’, taking a nominal approach to social inquiry, clearly leave out important details about *how* it is that services achieve meaning as ‘stigmatising’. Goffman’s seminal work on ‘stigma’ has remained marginal to the literature. Goffman (1963), along with Mitztal, more recently (2001), have provided an alternative approach to the study of stigma, in that they have examined *how* stigma works; the authors have departed from the simple naming or tacit use of this descriptor, towards analysis of how a social event/action comes to be named as ‘stigmatising’.

‘Trust’ is another key issue, which has drawn considerable research interest. ‘Trusting relationships’ are seen as key to the success of CAF (DfES 2003)²⁷ and with establishing ‘trust’ envisaged as a core skills for all workers involved with children in need and their families (DfES 2005). Debates, discussion and studies of

²⁷ The Common Assessment Framework is a very recent development in children’s services. It aims to facilitate access to services for children in need and their families via closer collaboration between diverse agencies, relevant to a child’s health and welfare needs (DfES 2003, 2004b).

'trust' are however subject to the same limitations as those of 'stigma'. Interest in 'trust' has largely arisen as a consequence of interest in service-user trust in professional relationships. An established discourse of what 'trust' is frequently stands prior to any analysis of helping relationships. The partnership discourse, for example, which is central to social work practices, is now deeply embedded in the literature and seen as offering a theoretical framework for facilitating 'trust' in professional relationships (Thoburn et al., 1995). Partnership is, however, a model of service delivery and whilst this model has been heralded as a vehicle for promoting trust relationships, the relevancies which organise partnership relationships have arisen from organisational relevancies, to do with information sharing or participation in decision-making. For example The Department of Health, has stated that effective relationships are based on the provision of information, service-user involvement and participation (DOH, 2000). In relation to the children's work-force development, training in core skills is simply organised around making users feeling valued as partners. Building open and honest relationships is seen as central to 'trust relationships' and this can be achieved via the provision of information and shared decision-making (DfES, 2004b).

The onus of CAF is to increase the number of professionals who can respond to need at the initial point of identification. Whilst part of the rationale for this increase is that social actors may have in existence relationships of 'trust' with diverse professionals such as a teacher, or doctor, (i.e. not just a social worker), there is no explication of how 'trust' works/is achieved *in situ*. Understandings of 'trust', whilst intuitively seen as critical in help-seeking processes, remain unexplicated. A number of studies have reported that service-users attribute the success of interventions to an

individual worker's skills and sensitivity (Spratt and Callan, 2004), but little is known about the detail of this skill and sensitivity. Evaluative studies continue to measure pre-formulated indicators of success to do with 'participation', for example. The evidence base that might assist helping agencies in offering 'trust' relationships is somewhat limited (see Corby Mills and Pope, 2002).

Models of help-seeking processes drawn from cognitive psychology appear across the literature (Tucker, 1995; Tsogia, 2000; Faver, et al., 1999). The Health Belief model defines help-seeking as a process which involves consideration of costs and benefits. Perceived costs to seeking help from formal services are, for example, suggested as loss of control of problems. The help-seeker is postulated as weighing such costs against the benefits of receiving support. Studies using the Health Belief model have argued that perception of problem severity is a key issue in determining whether individuals seek help from formal services. In the case of more serious problems the benefits of seeking help may more readily out-weigh, the costs of enduring the problem. Tucker (1995) claimed that the health belief model offers a framework for exploring the interaction between individual and structural factors influencing help-seeking behaviour and is of particular relevance to help-seeking and substance abuse. Faver et al. (1999) propose that the health belief model can be applied to 'explain an individual's use of child maltreatment prevention services' (p519). In the family support literature the health belief model has also been cited as a useful framework for thinking about the perceived costs for the potential help-seeker, who chooses to disclose stigmatising family problems (Faver et al. 1999). There is little discussion in the literature of how 'costs' come to be so defined

(where they are thus constituted). Rather, studies pursue the naming and stating of 'costs to help-seeking as stable phenomena of the social world.

As is characteristic of the generic literature on help-seeking, the majority of studies focus on the psychological impact of using *formal* services. To reiterate the point I made in the section above, formal support provides the referent for all studies, and questions are therefore asked in relation to, and focus on, this referent. Thus, in relation to questions about 'stigma', 'trust' or 'costs', thinking is driven by organisational relevancies regarding what constitutes 'stigma', 'trust' or 'costs'. Whilst one might postulate that 'trust' for example has some centrality in terms of help-seeking, few studies offer insights into how 'trust' relationships are organised, outside of formal provision. This again emerges as a distinct limitation in the literature, given that studies consistently report that individuals prefer 'informal support'. There are few studies which have sought to explore the social organisation of 'informal support' (diverse sources of support). Rather, knowledge about help-seeking from 'informal' support is in the main *inferred* from the analysis of help-seeking from formal services. For example, where participants report 'stigma' attached to help-seeking from formal services, an inference is then drawn that seeking help from informal sources is less stigmatising. From the current literature on help-seeking, it is not possible to know how this works.

Service organisation and help-seeking

There are a number of studies which have taken service organisation and help-seeking as a focus. These studies are concerned with accessibility of formal services.

There are a number of discernible themes in this literature. Firstly there is a body of work which has focused on the impact of targeted provision on service use. A number of studies have suggested that access to voluntary sector support can be difficult for populations who live outside of spatially targeted zones (Percy-Smith, 2000). There is a second body of literature concerned with the mixed economy of services post-marketisation. This literature raises questions about awareness in target communities of the diverse range of available services. For example, in relation to carers of older adults:

‘Confusion and lack of knowledge about services, the inflexibility and lack of availability of services... combine to impact negatively on the experiences of accessing and using formal support’ (Wiles, 2003, p189).

Morris (2000) reported that current structures of health and welfare provision create confusion for families, with families having limited knowledge of structures or eligibility criteria. This confusion is reported as a key barrier to service use. In the field of family support, there is concern that services are fragmented and present a confusing array of diverse provision (Oakley et al., 1998; Petrie and Wilson, 1999). Studies of help-seeking and domestic violence point to a similar confusion. Peckover (2003) noted that women experiencing domestic violence were unclear as to where or from whom they could seek formal help.

Across diverse fields of health and welfare there are also concerns about the duplication of services, but equally gaps in provision. Stanley et al., (2003) identified the lack of communication between child-care professionals and mental

health services in responding to children in need. Concerns about the fragmentation of services and ineffective communication between professionals have now become a key issue nationally. In the field of family support such studies, fuelled by the Climbié Inquiry (2003), now provide the evidence base for the move towards a common assessment and increased information sharing (DfES, 2003, 2005). This trend is however, in conflict with a number of other studies of help-seeking which report lack of confidentiality as a primary barrier (Wattam, 1999).

Flynn et al., (2003) looked at patients' concerns about use of electronic medical records highlighting concerns regarding confidentiality. Helms (2003) examined help-seeking in high school students, reporting the perceived lack of confidentiality afforded by professional services as a key barrier to help-seeking. In the field of family support, Butler and Williamson (1994) found that the main reason children did not report incidents of assault to professional adults, was because these adults could not guarantee absolute confidentiality. There are clearly confusing and inconsistent findings in the literature on family support around the advantages and disadvantages of increased information sharing and this suggests the need for further exploration of this issue in relation to help-seeking.

Within the field of family support there has also been interest in the level of user involvement in service organisation, with examination of the impact of user-led services. A number of studies report high levels of service-user satisfaction with user-led services in particular; service-users are reported as feeling that workers who share in an experience of the problem can 'understand' (Gray et al., 1997; Leader, 1995; Hill, 2001). This is also reported across other areas of health and welfare

(Beresford, 1994; Beresford and Campbell, 1994; Wallcraft, 1997; Harris et al., 2005).

There is a final but marginal body of literature which has taken as a focus cross-national comparison of help-seeking and health and welfare services. Baistow and Wilford (2000) compared service user access in contrasting European welfare systems. This study commences with a postulated relationship between typology of welfare regime and help-seeker strategies. For example, the authors suggest that the British system promotes assertive help-seeking, whereas in contrast the German system is more accessible, requiring less demanding strategies on the part of the help-seeker (see also CAPCAE, 1998). Whilst there is no further discernible body of literature which takes a cross-national approach to the study of help-seeking, this work raises interesting questions about the relationship between the social organisation of help-seeking, the framing/constitution of 'problems' and the organisation of welfare services.

The now diverse landscape of family support services has spawned a huge array of evaluative studies, which in general report mixed success of services, despite the sustained energies invested in making them more family-friendly. It is possible to conclude that even family-friendly services still struggle to attract target populations, with self-referral rates not reported as showing any marked increase in the wake of the re-focusing debate (Macdonald and Williamson, 2002; Spratt and Callan, 2004; Statham and Holterman, 2004).

Discussion

In 1963 Sacks stated that scientists construct a language of the social world in order to produce adequate descriptions. In the overview of the literature described above I have begun to tease out some of the 'descriptive apparatus' which social scientists have utilised, in order to achieve adequate descriptions of what is referred to in the literature as the social phenomenon of 'help-seeking'. In providing this overview I have indicated, for example, where social scientists draw on the language of variable analysis or generic representation. The majority of studies considered in this review so far can be described as following the canons of 'conventional sociology' or 'constructive analysis'. In the discussion that follows, I propose to further elaborate on how 'constructive analysis' works and what this approach leaves out. This paves the way for an alternative approach, described in chapters 3 and 4, influenced by ethnomethodology and the work of Harvey Sacks on MCA.

The majority of studies considered above commence with a received conceptual framework for considering help-seeking. Broadly, this framework centres on matters of organisational relevance to do with formal services. Enquiries pertaining to, entry to, and uptake of formal services are central. Characteristic of the majority of studies is an *a priori* structure for considering the relationship between problem formation and help-seeking. 'Problems' are articulated via an established definitional or diagnostic framework. Where there is any attempt to get beyond an *a priori* framework, researchers still share an aspiration towards 'universal definition'; that is consensus between help-seeker and help-provider as to 'correct'/agreed definitions. The constructive analyst trades in the established and legitimated methods of social

science, producing familiar and accountable descriptions of the social world. The challenge for the constructive analyst lies in adherence to the accepted methods or a 'common factual domain'²⁸ which produces 'reasonable' descriptions of the social world.

Returning to the study by Meltzor et al., (2000), what is discernible from this study is that to commence with a definition of problems (neurotic disorders), as laid out in ICD- 10, provides a 'common factual domain' for the study and its audience. That ICD-10 is used in this way testifies to its acceptance and function as an accountable 'language' or mediating apparatus between social researcher and social world. ICD-10 furnishes for the researcher and audience an agreed and 'objective' definition of the phenomenon, *prior to*, an inquiry into the phenomenon. That social science can proceed in this way (without accusations of tautology) is indicative of the reflexivity of social scientific accounting and the embeddedness of such diagnostic systems in the professional language of the mental health researcher. For Meltzor et al. (2000) ICD 10 provides the researcher a first approximation of the 'problems' in question. Such first approximations serve as objective indices of 'problems', condensing the work of problem formation and furnishing an economic means of accessing the phenomenon in question.

Whilst the methods that Meltzor et al., (2000) utilise make sense to the constructive analyst, from the perspective of ethnomethodology, the limitations of this approach

²⁸ The concept of a 'common factual domain' is from Zimmerman and Pollner (1990). Zimmerman and Pollner write that whilst sociologists may have different theories to describe the social world, and while different theories may 'appeal to disparate criteria and evidence for support of their respective versions', in general social scientists trade in a familiar language, terminology or a 'common factual domain' in and through which they reflexively produce agreed accounts of the social world (1990, p97). Central to the production of accountable descriptions is the use of socially sanctioned methods of inquiry.

are that the constructive analyst leaves out the *particulars* of phenomena. In this instance, and in considering help-seeking, the constructive analyst misses how, where, when and for what purposes the help-seeker makes relevant problem definition to whom. Indeed, one could argue that in the body of literature considered in this review it is the researcher who makes relevant this relationship. The audience is offered few insights into whether problem definition is relevant to processes of seeking help or how. Where there is criticism of these methods, the constructive analyst focuses on whose definition should be used, sought, found, stated or whether definitions are accurate, true or objective; there is no consideration of 'problem formulation' as a situated activity.

From the perspective of ethnomethodology, all the studies considered above, whether they take the relationship between problem definition, demography or psychological factors and help-seeking, presuppose a relationship between help-seeking and the selected variable *a priori*. Where there is any questioning of 'method', suggestions are remedial and worked within the boundaries of constructive theorising:

'The referents of investigation are possessed of a determinate structure, which may be exposed by the judicious selection and use of a method. Through one technique or another, the received social world is available as a topic of investigation. The social world is attended to as a domain whose stable properties are discoverable by some method. Key methodological questions turn on the choice of an appropriate method' (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1990, p98).

In commencing from a determinate structure, either in the form of problem definition or other discrete and presupposed equations and variables, in all studies the researcher glosses the particulars of phenomena.

Conventional sociologists appear to view the world through a grid which is imposed on the social world. Whilst it is not possible to suggest a standpoint outside the analyst's particular language, terminology or social practices, a key limitation with the existing research is that studies are dominated by concerns with formal service use, with relevancies laid out and drawn *sui generis*. There is a marked and noticeable absence in this literature of inquiry into situated decision-making as a practical activity within child-caring work. The extant literature suggests that the help-seeker has a number of options for help and that his or her preferred choice may not be formal help. However, there are few insights into how decisions to seek help from one source or another are organised.

Returning briefly to the study by Meltzor et al., (2000) on help-seeking and problem definition, for ethnomethodologists a neurotic disorder does not exist as an 'out there' objective phenomenon, but rather, is a diagnosis or label achieved in and through the reflexive work of naming, seeing, deciding or diagnosing a neurotic disorder (and the practical-occasioned demands which require such labelling). Ethnomethodology is directed to the work or ethnomethods which social actors deploy in achieving the social world. Ethnomethodologists do not start with or presuppose 'stable properties' of the social world, but, rather, investigate the processes in and through which phenomena come to be constituted as stable

phenomena. In the context of this study, in which I take categorisation work as a focus, that a category of help is selected as preferred in situated talk, would prompt an ethnomethodologists to ask, how does this particular source of help come to be constituted as preferred? How is decision –making organised so as to provide for any routine selections?

For any researcher, whilst he or she is necessarily limited by his/her embeddedness in a particular set of communicative and social practices, the ethnomethodologist offers an alternative to conventional sociology, by taking an epistemic focus. This present study, in bringing into view the *work* of situated decision-making in relation to the topic ‘help-seeking’, research is directed to epistemic matters; to do with deciding, selecting, assessing and so forth. In the introduction to this work I stated that despite the very significant and sustained energies that have been devoted to improving family support services, they continue to report low levels of self-referral in target populations. This suggests there is some detail that continues to evade policy-makers and practitioners alike and in taking an alternative methodological approach, I aim to open up new avenues of enquiry.

Chapter 2

The Research Materials

Introduction

In this chapter I will provide an overview of the research materials used in this study. The processes of data collection are described, followed by a consideration of ethical and practical considerations. The reader will be guided through a number of specific practical and ethical decisions taken in this study and which have arisen as a consequence of (i) the inclusion of participants from a British-Asian community and (ii) the inclusion of a 'hard to reach population' (parents/carers whose children have spent a period missing from school systems). In addition, decisions taken relating to transcribing and notation are identified.

Two stages of data collection

The research materials for this study were produced in data collection activities divided into two stages. The first stage of data collection commenced in May 2002 and comprised 24 focus groups and 48 interviews (data sets one and two). The second stage commenced in April 2003 and comprised a further 23 interviews (data set three). Data set three resulted from a research project commissioned by a Local Education Authority (referred to throughout as Authority X) and was funded by the Children and Young Persons Unit. In this second stage I had been asked by Authority X to interview parents where a child in the family had spent a substantial

period of time missing from school systems. This piece of research has been reported elsewhere (Broadhurst and May-Chahal, 2005).²⁹ Having obtained consent from Authority X for secondary analysis of these interviews, the materials were subject to further analysis for the purposes of the present study.

(i) Stage one (data sets one and two)

The research participants

Participants were initially recruited for focus group interviews, aiming to attract 5-7 participants (including the researcher) to each group (data set one). Following the focus groups, 2 participants from each focus group were asked to participate in a further follow up interview (data set two). Participation in the interviews was on a voluntary/convenience basis. Participants were recruited from two contrasting urban and rural communities. The communities were however matched in terms of local provision of child-welfare services. Both localities were serviced by health-care facilities, schools, play group/child-care facilities, as well as statutory and voluntary sector family support provision. In the rural community, 12 focus groups were conducted with a majority white population, conducting 6 groups with male only participants and 6 groups with female only participants. The urban sample was drawn, 6 from a majority white population and 6 from a minority British Asian population, again with half the groups consisting of female participants and half the groups consisting of male participants. The minority ethnic population described themselves as Sunni Muslim in terms of religious affiliation. Individuals were also

²⁹The project required three reports which were circulated internally by Authority X and a further article was published in British Journal of Sociology of Education (2005).

recruited to the focus groups from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (see Appendix 3 for a breakdown of focus group composition). The sample was selected with the aim of including a diverse range of social actors and to allow for the consideration of the standard variables of 'gender', 'social class' and 'ethnicity'³⁰. Participants were also selected on the basis that they had experience of parenting children, either as birth-parents, step-parents or carers. Given that the study aimed to stimulate talk about help-seeking within child-welfare, it was felt that participants needed to be able to recount or envisage family problems that can impact on the welfare of children, and consider a range of sources of help.

Participants were recruited to the focus groups by the researcher making contact with networks outside of formal services; friends meeting in local pubs, women frequenting the same play-group, individuals who worked together in local shops/factories were all considered possible candidates. Selection to the initial focus groups aimed to include individuals who were already informally connected and this was with the aim of prompting lively discussion. Prior focus group research has suggested that interaction between participants is maximised when individuals are already part of a kin/friendship/work network (Pithouse, 1987; Kitzinger, 1994; Johnson, 1996; Greenbaum, 2000). In the British Asian sample, informal relationships tended to be based around kin, whereas in the majority white sample, focus group relationships were based on friendship networks (see Appendix 3 for focus group and interview composition). A decision to sample from networks outside of formal services was taken following the review of prior studies of help-seeking, which found that the majority of studies focused on service-user

³⁰ As stated in the introduction, the initial aims of the research were revised and the variables of gender and so forth were only considered where made relevant by participants.

populations and the point of entry to formal services (see Chapter 1). Sampling from outside of services did not preclude, however, that a proportion of individuals participating in the study may have been involved with designated family support agencies. The sampling strategy was clearly purposive along a number of dimensions, rather than random or representative (Sarantakos, 2005).

The focus group method

In order to capture something of decision-making, in relation to the topic 'help-seeking', research participants were presented with a vignette and asked to consider whether there were any problems that the family depicted in the vignette might seek help with. Participants were also asked to consider where, or from whom, the fictitious family members might seek help and were prompted to name sources of help. The vignette depicted family problems to do with parenting, relationship stress and conflict, physical assault of a child, as well as problems of debt. The family problems depicted in the vignette were designed to invoke consideration of a range of child-welfare interventions (see Appendix 1). One of the children in the vignette was described as in conflict with an adult and displaying signs of stress. Participants were asked open-ended questions to prompt consideration of diverse sources of help, and in addition asked directly whether child-welfare agencies should be involved with the family. The vignette comprised two parts, with an escalation of family problems in the second part, culminating in an adult physically chastising a child. Participants were initially presented with part one and asked to consider help-seeking options; they were then presented with part two and asked the same questions (see Appendix 1).

The role of the moderator has drawn significant attention in focus group research (Greenbaum 2000, Kreuger 2000). In this study, whilst the vignette was presented in written form with a series of five short prompt questions, discussion was largely allowed to take its own course. Each group differed in terms of the extent that I was required to participate. Some groups essentially 'took over' the discussion, whilst in other groups participants looked to me to direct the flow of conversation. The only formal decisions taken prior to the start of the focus groups were, first, that I would intervene if the comfort or safety of any participant became compromised and, second, that I would specifically ask participants to consider 'child-welfare' (rather than 'child protection') services. Whilst the chosen research methods clearly prescribe consideration of help-seeking in relation to a specific topic 'family problems and help-seeking', I did not want to further influence discussion by narrowing decision-making *a priori* around child protection services. This did not preclude, however, that participants might consider child protection services relevant. Participants were asked initially to consider 'child-welfare' agencies and if further clarification was requested, participants were presented with a diverse list of agencies such as, NSPCC, Sure-Start or Social Services.

The vignette was piloted with four focus groups (two male and two female) to establish group size and assess whether the vignette would prompt exchange between participants. The vignette proved at an early stage a very useful vehicle for stimulating discussion. Smaller groups seemed to elicit lively discussion from the research participants and thus group size was established as between 5-7 participants to include the moderator.

The interview method

48 interviews were conducted with participants selected from the above focus groups (data set two). 2 participants from each focus group were asked to volunteer to take part in a further interview. Again the data collection took place between 2002 and 2003. In the interviews, participants were prompted via a series of semi-structured questions to recount help-seeking experiences and/or discuss help-seeking preferences (see Appendix 1). Each interview varied in terms of length, flow of conversation and topic.

The interview schedule was piloted drawing on 4 participants from the pilot focus groups. Each interview was found to take its own course and the level of prompting required varied significantly. However, the short prompt questions served their purpose in stimulating conversation and posing help-seeking choices.

(ii) Stage two (Data set three)

The second stage of data collection commenced in 2003 and was as a result of a piece of research commissioned by a Local Education Authority and funded by the Children and Young Persons Unit. The Local Authority (Authority X), asked for a piece of research to be conducted to explore 'factors' which impacted on a child going missing from school systems (the child had spent a period of months/years not registered with any school). Interviews were conducted with 23 parents, whose child (or children) had spent a period missing from school systems. The findings from the

study have been reported elsewhere (Broadhurst and May-Chahal, 2005); for the present study, the interview transcripts have been subject to further and different analysis. The interview transcripts for this commissioned piece of research were considered useful materials for the present study as the research participants who offered their stories had, in many instances, sought help from diverse sources. Whilst the data was collected according to the requirements of the broader research project commissioned by Authority X, the interview transcripts provided insights into help-seeking choices and how these were organised. In many instances the participants included in this study had histories of very significant socio-economic disadvantage, with troubled life histories. The participants shared many characteristics of populations referred to as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘hard to reach’, which, as I stated in the introduction to this work are a social group that evaluative studies have suggested are difficult to reach (McDonald and Williamson, 2002; Broadhurst and May-Chahal, 2005). Little is known about help-seeking decision-making in such ‘hard to reach’ populations and this observation provided the warrant for inclusion of this group of participants.

Interviews were conducted using short prompt open-ended questions; the interview schedule was devised in consultation with key stakeholders participating in the project (Appendix 1).

(iii) General ethical and practical considerations

The study required that a number of practical and ethical decisions be made, with respect to matters such as confidentiality, protection of research participants, transcription and storage of data. It is difficult to separate out ethical from practical considerations hence; throughout the course of the project ethical considerations were placed central and influenced many of the practical decisions taken. The following extract from the ESRC captures this sense of the place of research ethics in any research project:

‘Research ethics’ refers to the moral principles guiding research, from its inception through to completion and publication of results and beyond’
(ESRC, P7, 2005).

Ethical decisions were informed by national guidance produced by the ESRC, the National Research Governance Framework (DOH, 2001) and also the University of Central Lancashire’s own internal ethical policies and procedures. The project was subject to full ethical approval by the Faculty of Health Research Committee, University of Central Lancashire . The requirements of this committee influenced ethical considerations and decisions taken during the study and the following considerations were given priority throughout:

- Informed consent
- Confidentiality of information and anonymity (according to Data Protection Act 1998)

- Voluntarism and protection of vulnerable participants
- Use of, and adherence to the University of Central Lancashire's systems of ethical approval, review and monitoring systems.

Engaging participants

The project was subject to full ethical approval by the Faculty of Health Research Committee, at the University of Central Lancashire. The requirements of this committee influenced ethical considerations and decisions taken during the study with relation to sampling and engagement of research participants. In addition the research process adhered to guidance issued by the Department of Health regarding the care of research participants during the research process:

‘the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of participants must be the primary consideration in any research study (DOH, 2001, para 2:2, p8).

All participants who were asked to volunteer to take part in the study were given written information about the project. The issue of informed consent was an important consideration driving the study, particularly given the inclusion of individuals from vulnerable populations (Krumer-Nnevo, 2002; Humphries, 2000; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). All participants were provided with clear information about confidentiality, recording and storage of data and how data would be used throughout the research process (Appendix 2). None of the participants presented with literacy difficulties, however, participants were all asked if they wished me to read the vignette and questions. Where participants spoke Gujarati only, the

community researcher read the vignette to participants, whilst simultaneously verbally translating.

A suitable venue was negotiated with volunteers and those selected ranged from people's homes, backrooms of playgroups to pubs. Given the sampling strategy aimed to include individuals drawn from a range of social contexts, it was felt that a standard venue was not needed; rather the important consideration was that all members were comfortable with the venue. Use of diverse venues also required obtaining consents to use of many sites and ensuring that the audio-equipment would be effective in recording conversation in the chosen setting.

As the start of each focus group or interview, rules of confidentiality and the purposes of the research were reiterated and the participants were advised that they could terminate their participation at any point. Equally, participants could request withdrawal of data at a later point if they wished and a point of contact at the university was made available to all participants. Principles of voluntarism and respect for individual choice guided this research project, in a legal context in which the Human Rights Act 1998 is increasingly influential.

Data recording and transcribing

Permission was sought in both the focus groups and all interviews to audio record conversations. Permission was granted in all cases. Approximately 80%³¹ of the tapes were transcribed verbatim. The following labelling codes were used:

- FG1- FG24 for focus groups ...(data set one)
- Int1- Int48 for interviews(data set two)
- BPInt1- BPInt23 for interviews(data set three)

Participants in each focus group were labelled A-F (depending on the number of participants) and the researcher was labelled R. In the interviews the interviewee was labelled P and the researcher labelled R. Where any names are used these are fictitious. Data was stored for data management purposes using the software package ATLAS.

Full transcripts were produced of each audio-tape, but only the content rather than form of each conversation was initially transcribed, producing a draft content transcript. During analysis, however, tapes were replayed and used together with these draft transcripts to produce the volume of detailed, transcribed extracts presented in chapters 4 – 9. The decision to produce draft content transcripts as initial working documents, resulted from time constraints and because of the large volume of data generated.

³¹ Time constraints inhibited full verbatim transcription of all the tapes. Having established aspects of the data of analytic interest, tapes which had not been transcribed were listened to and notes made accordingly.

The transcribed extracts presented in chapters 4 - 9 include some notation of form. Listed below are the transcript symbols used in notation. I have not made use of the full range of notation suggested in conversation analytic research given the focus of this work on membership categorisation. The rationale for using some transcript notation was simply that the reader might thus gain a better sense of the flavour of talk-in-interaction. Transcription inevitably strips situated talk of its richness and in addition can misrepresent participants' contributions (DeVault, 1999). Additional notation can go some way to remedying this.

Notation:

= used to indicate adjacent utterances, the second being connected immediately to the first (without overlapping it)

// interrupt

- a dash indicates a short un-timed pause

Word underline indicates a word or group of words emphasised in talk

CAPITALS indicate an utterance that is significantly raised in volume, from surrounding utterances

Aside from the transcript notation detailed above, use of normal punctuation has been used to convey the sense of talk for the reader. Line numbers have been added to longer extracts to facilitate discussion (all extracts of 14 lines or over).

Data storage

The security of primary data was ensured at all times. All tapes and data transferred to word-processed files/paper were kept in a locked cabinet. Access to computer files was protected by secure password system. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. All word-processed files were coded to protect anonymity of participants. Inclusion of any extracts of data in reports/publications has been carefully selected in order to protect participants' identity (D' Cruz & Jones, 2004). The protection and security of data has paid due consideration to the Data Protection Act 1998, the University of Central Lancashire's code of conduct for research; which is in turn informed by the government's governance framework for research (DOH, 2001).

(iv) Specific practical and ethical considerations

Working with the British- Asian Community

There is an abundance of literature which deals with the meaning of categories of race and ethnicity, and theorises the position of the researcher (Bhabha, 1996; Bhopal, 2001; Gunaratnam, 2003). The recent trend in social research has been that the social researcher, where he or she is differently/similarly socially located from the research participants, theorises his or her position prior to the research process, in order to facilitate 'reflexivity' and gain awareness of impact of self on the research process (Truman et al., 2000). The following statement is illustrative:

‘My structural position as a South Asian woman affected my research and has enabled me to examine the many-faceted complexities of the dynamics involved in woman-to-woman interviewing’ (Bhopal, 2001, p71).

As I discuss in some detail in the next chapter, I am keen to distance the understanding of reflexivity used in this project, from the popular use of the term, where reflexive practice is to do with acknowledgement and theorising of one’s own subjectivity (Lynch, 2000). In the context of this popular use of the term, ‘reflexivity’ is frequently posited as some kind of ‘solution to’ both the practical and ethical problems of objectivism. Starting from an alternative understanding, that there is no antonym to the reflexive organisation of all accounts, it makes little sense to theorise one’s own subjectivity in this way at the outset (see chapter 3). Taking as a starting point the reflexivity of all communicative interaction with no time out, where ‘outsider’ or ‘difference’ has become relevant in this study, this is noted from analysis of the situated and concerted activities of co-participants, rather than theorised *a priori*. Thus, from the standpoint of this work, ‘difference’ is only dealt with where those matters are rendered relevant in and through the situated communicative activities of co-participants.

Gunarantnam (2003) has presented a detailed critique of how the categories of race and ethnicity are dealt with in the research process and has, in particular, highlighted the problems of typologising social groups *a priori*. Whilst Gunarantnam’s critique starts from a different theoretical standpoint from the present study, Gunarantnam’s suggestion that research should consider instead the ‘the dynamic constitution’ of

the meaning of race and ethnicity in and through 'social discourse', is clearly highly relevant (Gunaratnam, 2003, p7). The standpoint taken in this work does not negate, however, that careful attention be paid to a number of important practical considerations when working with individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

A number of practical considerations arose during the planning stages of the research. In particular a question arose as to the relevance of the vignette used with the majority white sample for the British-Asian population. Therefore, at the planning stage, I began to develop a relationship with two women drawn from the British-Asian community who assisted the research work with this community. The two women were asked their opinion as to the relevance of the vignette for the British-Asian sample group and they facilitated access to participants. Given that a proportion of participants spoke only Gujarati in the sample, the two community researchers³² also played a key role in facilitating a number of focus groups and in translating and transcribing transcripts. The two women were paid as community researchers. Throughout the research process I aimed to equip the women with research skills and advise them about further research opportunities. The two women have now gone on to undertake further formal training in interpreting and translation and are keen to use these skills in research work.

³² Where the two women are referred to in this study I have used the descriptor 'community researcher'.

Working with vulnerable and hard to reach populations.

A set of particular ethical and practical considerations also arose in working with the service-user group in Authority X. These considerations centred on data protection, accessing this population and the potential vulnerability of the participants.

In order to assist Authority X in developing its work with children missing from education, certain data held by the Social Inclusion Central Team working in the education department of Authority X needed to be shared with the researchers. Approval was granted for the sharing of names of children and basic information regarding movements, length of time out of school and current educational status by the Assistant Director of Education. Access to further information such as personal case files was not necessary for the purposes of this thesis, and contact with participants was only made after key workers, already allocated to families, had obtained informed consent.

At the outset of work with this service-user group, it was envisaged that families invited to participate in the research would potentially have experienced a high level of difficult or negative life experiences. Inviting individuals with such histories and then giving participants space to talk at length about their lives can place individuals at some risk. Individuals may incriminate themselves, disclose intent to self-harm or harm others. In order to respond to such issues, processes of selection of participants, as well as the problem of responding to disclosure were given detailed consideration.

Initial discussions took place with the project manager, located in Authority X, concerning the suitability of participants initially selected for interview. Clarification concerning vulnerability factors was sought, specifically making queries regarding a) participants' capacity to participate in the study and b) that participation would not jeopardise work in progress. The following case example illustrates this process:

Case example

One family, the 'Browns', were selected by the researcher during the sampling process. Identification of the family was based on the fact that the child 'Peter Brown' had spent a period missing from school and also the family had a history of transience. Upon consultation with the project manager, however, she offered that the family had a history of very difficult relationships with professionals. The project manager argued that engaging Peter in research might arouse the suspicion of Peter's parents and thus jeopardise working relationships. A decision was taken not to include Peter's parents in any research interviews.

Following confirmation of the selection of participants, key workers allocated to families (social inclusion team central) initially approached families in the first instance with a covering letter from Authority X stating support for the project and requesting participation. In addition the key workers gave individuals an information sheet prepared by the researcher stating the aims of the research and requirements of participants (Appendix 2). If individuals indicated a desire to participate in the research, further verbal, detailed information was given by the researcher, before informed consent was requested. This information covered the role of the research

participant, aims of research and confidentiality. Research participants were also informed about the professional background of the researcher (social work).

Responding to disclosure: Vulnerable populations

When offering individuals from vulnerable populations the opportunity to talk in some depth about sensitive issues, there is the possibility that an individual may disclose material which the researcher feels she has to pass on. An awareness of this eventuality led to careful consideration of whether participants could be assured complete confidentiality. Having carefully considered this issue, however, a decision was taken for this particular research project, that all participants *would* be assured absolute confidentiality. This decision was based on the fact that all individuals were already in contact with a range of professional agencies that had a remit to promote the safety and security of children and their families. In particular a key-worker system was in place and progress of individual cases was closely monitored. Many, if not all of the participants had a history of being involved with the child protection system which had caused them to be suspicious of professionals aligned to that work. Workers involved with the selected families advised us that a position outside of 'the agency', that is, if we adopted a more neutral stance, distancing ourselves from the work of the Local Authority, then problems of engagement were less likely. Thus, I introduced myself as a researcher, upon initial engagement with the participants, making clear my alignment to the University of Central Lancashire.

The decision to assure confidentiality, however, did not preclude the researcher from strongly encouraging any individual to seek help, should the researcher assess that the individual was in need. Again my own background in social work and

knowledge of the field-work area, enabled me to assist participants in this manner. As a qualified social worker I also drew on an extensive understanding of and awareness of child protection and family support issues. In the unlikely event of an individual presenting himself or herself or another as in an immediate life-threatening situation, a decision was made that I would breach confidentiality and alert the agency already in contact with the family. The family were to be informed of this breach of confidentiality. No instances presented where such breaches were necessary, however, on two occasions I made a request for help on the part of a participants who were not fully aware of the range of help available. I drew on my knowledge of the field-work area and background as a social worker, to assist participants to facilitate help-seeking.

In social research there are those who advocate that complete confidentiality can never be assured to either a child or an adult and those who argue differently, believing that the integrity of the research is undermined by such approaches (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Steinberg et al., 1999; Palys and Lowman, 2001). Bostock (2002) adopted a child protection protocol for her research, which required that she made clear to all research participants at the start of interviews that disclosure of risk or harm to a child would warrant her making a report to an appropriate agency. Bostock explored the impact of the child protection protocol upon the quality of her data. She asked the mothers participating in the study to comment directly on the impact of the protocol. She concluded that mothers' responses showed that they were supportive but uncomfortable about taking part in an interview framed by child protection concerns. Bostock offers the following quote from one participant about the protocol: ' "it served to 'put the frighteners on

you” ’ (2002, p281). Bostock concluded that use of the protocol was not unproblematic, though she favoured use of it. In noting these observations, I concluded that to frame the interviews from a child protection protocol, or similar, in this project would serve to further alienate some cohorts of participants who already have tenuous relationships with professional services and/or damage on-going work with professional agencies. I saw the research interviews as an opportunity for participants to have their story listened to and decided that to frame interviews from a child protection protocol might inhibit this opportunity and impact on engagement. Certainly feedback from participants suggested that the research process, in giving participants a ‘listening ear’, was a positive experience.

There are clearly those in the field who are likely to support this ethical decision and those who may object to it. In considering ethical issues, this project is informed by key literature and also consultation with professionals managing the project in Authority X. There is currently no legal mandate for reporting child protection concerns and indeed there are a number of studies that have questioned the effectiveness of mandatory reporting (Parton et al., 1997; Ainsworth, 2002; Wattam, 2002). Upon reflection on the process of interviews and focus groups the ethical decisions taken did not require any breach of the absolute confidentiality assured, however, this is not to suggest that this ethical standpoint is thus, generally applicable. Each and every research project requires detailed consideration of ethical considerations. Upon reflection, the decisions taken in this particular project, whilst contentious, did not cause or increase the vulnerability of participants, as far as it is possible to ascertain such matters. Indeed, many participants commented very

favourably on the interview process and expressed their willingness to engage in further research.

Chapter 3

Analytic Frameworks: Ethnomethodology and MCA

Introduction

In chapter 1, I provided an overview of the extant literature on 'help-seeking'. I stated that a central concern expressed in this literature, is that individuals who are deemed to need help, fail to seek help from formal services. I noted that whilst this body of literature has raised many important questions, the somewhat one-sided focus on formal support, has left a number of questions unanswered. In the extant literature, insights into *how* social actors choose between diverse sources of help are very limited. In this literature the accountable properties of help-seeking decision-making are theorised *a priori*, with studies missing the particulars of how decision-making as a situated activity is organised. Having described the research materials in chapter 2, in this chapter I will provide a detailed overview of the analytic frameworks used for this study. In this chapter I develop some of the observations made in the previous chapter and chart out an alternative methodological approach which takes an epistemic focus. Analysis centres on explicating something of the accountable properties of decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking' in research conversations. In taking this approach, I focus on *how* in research conversations, social actors (participants and the researcher alike) can select, invoke, and specify one form of help over another. The warrant for this somewhat unconventional approach lies in the same warrant for any study aspiring to find something new; as Jayyusi writes,

What further issues, questions, and findings about the social order does any particular analysis open up? That is to say what horizon of significance can one uncover? (1984, p1).

In taking an alternative epistemic focus and making use of the tools of MCA the study aims to extend the parameters of research on help-seeking and open up further avenues of enquiry.

There are four sections to this chapter. In the first section I will provide a broad overview of ethnomethodology's programme and explicate how the concerns of ethnomethodology are relevant for the focus of this work. The central argument is that ethnomethodology, in focusing on 'ethnomethods', provides a vehicle for unpacking situated decision-making and directs the researcher to focus on the *particulars* of phenomena. In this first section I provide a descriptive overview of key concepts, which provide for ethnomethodology's 'maxims' and 'policies' (Lynch 1993, p13). Discussion will centre on concepts of 'indexicality', 'reflexivity', 'intersubjectivity' and 'accountability'. Whilst these concepts are presented in abstract form, as the reader progresses through the thesis, further illustrations of these concepts are supplied.

In the second section of the chapter discussion centres on some of the philosophical questions which now beset the ethnomethodological programme. I address questions which have been raised concerning the 'scientistic' tendencies inherent in ethnomethodological studies, particularly in Conversation Analytic research (CA).

In this section I make clear that in my thesis I take a post-analytic standpoint³³ aiming to approach extracts of data as ‘patchworks of orderliness’, rather than seeking any over-arching worldview outside the vernacular of ordinary language.

In the third section I introduce Sacks’s work on MCA, discussing how this ‘descriptive apparatus’³⁴, can provide a vehicle for unpacking *how* social actors choose between or make relevant one category of help over another. I expand on the analytic focus of this project which commences with the co-production of social order as manifest in local instances of categorisation work. I trace the links between ethnomethodology and MCA and outline the particular analytic focus of MCA. Developments in the field of MCA are also considered, in particular the work of Hester and Eglin (1997) who have underlined the ethnomethodological character of membership categorisation. This chapter concludes by providing an overview of Sacks’s work ‘Search for Help’ (1966) and I discuss the relevance of this work for the present study.

³³ The methodological work of Lynch, as discussed in ‘Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action’ (1993) is referred to in this thesis. Lynch details and responds to the confusions and tensions which now beset the ethnomethodological programme, particularly the suggestion which can be read from some ethnomethodological studies that a perspective outside the vernacular and practices of ordinary language is achievable. Lynch articulates a post-analytic standpoint, a stand-point without pretence to a transcendental vantage point. Across this chapter I draw on the central tenets of Lynch’s notion of post analytic Ethnomethodology. See also Lynch and Bogen 1996 (full reference in bibliography)

³⁴ Sacks offers MCA as a descriptive apparatus rather than a theoretical perspective (1966).

Ethnomethodology: Policies and Maxims

(i) The co-production of social order

Ethnomethodology marks a radical departure from what I have referred to in previous chapters as 'conventional' social science or constructive analysis. As Button (1991) writes, ethnomethodology cannot be seen as some new moment in sociology or as offering anything remedial for sociology's methodological troubles; it is something different. Whilst ethnomethodology takes sociology's foundational topics, such as social order or social action as its focus, 'its orientation to those topics is at odds with most of the established theories and methodologies in the social sciences' (Lynch 1993, p1). Conventional social science, conducted in the Parsonian³⁵ tradition, posits social order as external to and constraining on social actors, in contrast ethnomethodology is concerned with the *co-production* of social order. Thus the radical departure which ethnomethodology makes from conventional sociology lies in the focus upon what people *do* in social settings. Ethnomethodology is an alternative sociology, in that it offers a respecification of order, 'in-and-of-the-workings-of-ordinary-society' (Button, p7, 1991). For ethnomethodologists, an understanding that social actions are irreducibly 'events-in-a-social order' (Button, 1991, p7), means that social actions are not separated from the context of their use, rather they are *situated*; ethnomethodologists are interested in circumstantial detail. A key feature of ethnomethodological inquiry is interest in the interactional specifics, procedures and methods in and through which individuals

³⁵ Ethnomethodological studies frequently make reference to the Parsonian legacy, which characterises conventional social science. 'Parsonian' studies seek to describe the structures of social order, which are external to and constrain social actors. Thus, as Mehan (1975) writes, from the perspective of Parsonian studies 'social order is a reality sui generis' (p180).

go about *achieving* the social world. Indeed the term ethnomethodology stems from Garfinkel's (1967) interest in 'ethnomethods', the methods in and through which the social actor accomplishes the social world.

Garfinkel's classic text, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), charts out and illustrates an ethnomethodological perspective. For those who have chosen to follow in his footsteps, motivation to take such an approach largely stems from a profound disappointment with conventional sociology's analysis of the social. This is summarised as a profound disillusionment with what happens to sociology's topics when they are subjected to professional social-scientific analysis. Lynch (1993), describes this disappointment as to do with,

'...not only the widely acknowledged "looseness" of sociology's analytic procedures or the inconclusiveness of the predictions based on them. In my judgement it has more to do with the way that sociological perspectives and methods have been designed to give unified treatments of an entire roster of topics: families, religions, riots, gender relations, race and ethnicity, class systems and the like'(page nu).

Thus, ethnomethodology takes issue with the methods of constructive analysis, which pursue generic representations and solutions and prefers instead a focus on the *particularities* of phenomena. From an ethnomethodological perspective, conventional sociology's pursuit of 'generic solutions' or 'objective' phenomena, results in phenomena *abstracted* from the context of production. Central to understanding ethnomethodological observations and concerns regarding the

decontextualising practices of conventional sociology, is the concept of 'indexicality'.

(ii) *indexicality*

In a seminal paper by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) '*On formal structures of Practical action*', the authors detail how the project of conventional sociology in pursuing 'objective statements' makes a 'problem' of the *indexical* features of ordinary language use. Indexicality refers to an understanding that words or expressions do not have absolute or finite meanings; rather the meaning of a word or expression lies in its *use* (or context). Given that social research examines the communicative activity, in and through which social activities are constituted and manifest, one might also say that an *action* cannot not be thought of as exclusively resulting from abstract notions such as 'attitudes' or 'social class' for example. Action is seen as tied both for its production and intelligibility to the actual situations of its use. Coulter (1990) makes this point in the following extracts:

‘ The identifiability of any action cannot be thought of as an exclusive function of the bodily (including vocal) articulations involved in its production, it is rather, a complex function of the circumstances in which and the assignable purposes for which it is performed’ (1990, pViii).

And further:

‘Our routine and commonsense ‘understandings’ of each other’s actions and activities cannot depend upon explicit and all-purpose discursive formulations of their meaning(s), whether mental or public in character. Sense-making is rather a function of the in situ organisation of whatever is said and done...’ (1990, pix).

The phrase ‘indexical expression’ was borrowed by Garfinkel from Bar-Hillel (1954), who was involved in the production of an early translation machine. For Bar-Hillel, a number of expressions defied absolute definition and thus he coined the notion of ‘indexical expressions’; expressions for which a precise dictionary definition could not be specified in advance of their use. In developing a revised concept of ‘indexical expressions’, Garfinkel stressed that the indexical feature of language was *pervasive* rather than specific to particular expressions. Garfinkel observed that for conventional sociology, part of the problem that beset this programme, was in conventional sociology’s intent to replace indexical expressions with objective expressions. Taking utterances from interview or conversational settings and abstracting those utterances from that context, the researcher fails to recognise the indexical nature of all talk with no time out. Any pursuit of ‘meaning’ abstracted from context, any pursuit of the ‘truth value’ of words or statements, will inevitably have to deal with the irredeemable indexicality of language. In contrast, as Barnes and Law (1976) write, ‘ethnomethodologists have shown no interest in ‘truth-values’ (p224); expressions are always indexical, ‘meanings depend upon the particular contexts of their use, and are continually negotiated and renegotiated by actors on the basis of ‘what everyone knows’ (p224).

For ethnomethodologists who pursue description of situated activity, 'indexicality' is a pervasive feature of ordinary language use and communicative activity that is irreparable. The focus of ethnomethodological studies lies therefore, not in how the research process can manage the 'problem' of indexicality, but rather how it is that on occasions of communicative activity, individuals manage to make adequate sense and adequate reference with the linguistic and other resources at hand.

(iii) *Accountability*

At the heart of the ethnomethodological perspective is the concept of *accountability*. To describe social activity as 'accountable' is to understand that the co-production of the social world and the activities that constitute that world are *orderly* and that this *orderliness* is open to view (or observable). Social actors, as they go about their daily affairs orient to this orderliness, as 'ordinary, 'banal' and easily witnessed by anybody who participates competently in those practices' (Lynch 1993, p14). Thus, 'accountability' is often translated into the more economical phrase-'observable-reportable' (Lynch 1993, p14). The concept of accountability provides the researcher with both a standpoint (to observe and describe what is accountable) and also a rationale and method for understanding the social organisation of a topic such as 'help-seeking' through its accountable properties.

Without an appreciation of the concept of accountability, ethnomethodology often attracts accusations of 'radical situationalism' (Mehan 1991, p74) that is an approach that reflects the extreme end of relativism. As ethnomethodologists are at pains to point out, however, ethnomethodology finds a place outside the realism-

relativism debate. Whilst the social world is subject to local conjecture, it is equally orderly (Mchoul 1982). In order to illustrate this perspective the case of traffic is often cited, as a routine and highly organised activity, but equally an activity that is subject to local conjecture. For example, any motorist, knowing 'the rules of driving' on dual-carriage ways, understands that to travel at a speed of 70mph is routinely acceptable or expectable. However, where the motorist notices there is an accident ahead, the *occasioned* circumstances of 'an accident ahead', would disrupt the normal flow of traffic. Motorists would be required to alter 'normal' speed accordingly and in response to the circumstantial detail of the 'accident ahead'. This touches on another key ethnomethodological concept, the notion of *inter-subjectivity*.

(iv) *Inter-subjectivity*

Conventional sociology generally trades in the notion of *individual* subjectivity and this standpoint is associated with the assumptive framework of cognitive psychology. In contrast for ethnomethodologists the world is *inter-subjectively* available. Tolmie conveys the sense of inter-subjectivity in the following extract:

'It is tremendously hard to imagine a world where the organisation of sociality did not turn upon such presumption for every possibility of intersubjectivity seems to turn upon it. How can one hope even to begin to engage with others and navigate your way amongst them if you do not have a sense of that, at least grossly, they see the world as you do?' (2004, p6).

For ethnomethodologists, social actors share in an expectation of corroborating perspectives and conceptual reciprocity (Pollner 1974). Social actors rely upon 'a panoply of suppositions regarding the inter-subjective character of events in what they regard rightly or wrongly, as the 'outer' or 'public' domain'³⁶ ' (Pollner 1974, p3). Ethnomethodological analysis is thus directed to the *display* of co-produced activities and practical reasoning or, as Garfinkel stated, social actors' 'documentary practices' (1967, p98). For ethnomethodologists, following Wittgenstein (1952), there is little inside the head of individual social actors that warrants analytic attention. This distinctly different analytic focus marks a departure from conventional sociological studies of social order, which follow in the cognate tradition (Howe 1996). For ethnomethodologists, the social order is observable and accountable, thus rendering social activities open to view (Garfinkel 1967). That the social actor has no problem observing at a glance what is before his or her eyes, as he or she goes about his or her life (that's a supermarket queue, that's a church service, that's a couple having an argument and so forth) attests to the inter-subjective and *rational* properties of the social world and its social actors. This is nowhere more evident than when accountable practices are breached, such as when a doctor fails to offer medical treatment (Jayyusi 1984) or a son or daughter acts as a stranger in their own home (Garfinkel 1992).

(v) *Reflexivity*

One of the most elusive concepts, which is equally central to the ethnomethodological perspective is the concept of *reflexivity*; this is a term now

³⁶ This is akin to Schutz's 'natural attitude'³⁶ (Schutz 1970, p254).

widely and divergently used. Garfinkel stated of conventional sociology that sociological descriptions are endogenous to the fields of action that professional sociologists investigate; descriptions are *reflexive* to those settings (1967). Lynch offers the following example drawing on Garfinkel's work;

‘Garfinkel observed that jurors in their own fashion examined various evidential documents and testimonies. Jurors referred to the evidence and they ruminated about the import of that evidence for the case at hand. They speculated about how the society outside the courtroom could have produced the events under dispute. What they determined was reflexive to their ways of determining it, and their descriptions and evidential arguments were reflexively embedded in their deliberations. Moreover the jurors themselves treated the reports and testimonies presented by litigants as variously plausible descriptions, that expressed or reflected the litigants' purposes, aims, motives, entitlements, obligations, social statuses...’ (1993, p16).

Returning for a moment to the literature outlined in the previous chapter, I detailed a study by Meltzor et al. (2000), in which the researchers were interested in a relationship between how individuals define problems and help-seeking. The study, in considering ‘definition’, commenced with *a priori* definitions of mental health problems, as laid out in the formal diagnostic system known as ICD-10. In illustrating the reflexivity of accounts, use of ICD-10, as an *a priori* definitional framework, rests for its legitimation on the embeddedness of this diagnostic system within the practices and attendant technologies of mental health practices. It is on the basis of just this embeddedness that the researchers can use, presuppose and

legitimate their *a priori* reference to this system, as a way of conducting their research. The findings from Meltzoff et al. are understood, achieve their credibility and further constitute the field in which these findings are co-produced (and where ICD-10 serves as adequate reference). This is the essence of reflexivity in an ethnomethodological sense.

I am keen to distance the concept of reflexivity I use from the more popular use of this term found extensively in texts of social research. The *popular* use of the term is in the context of the radical struggle against objectivism (See Alversson & Sköldberg 2000 for an example of this approach). In contrast to this popular sense of 'reflexivity', the articulation of 'reflexivity' I offer in this work commences with an understanding that there is no antonym to the 'problem' of reflexivity (Lynch 1993, 2000). Indeed to describe reflexivity as a problem detracts from reflexivity as an everyday and unavoidable feature of communicative practices (Lynch 2000). Reflexivity is the property of communicative activity, whereby 'it' constructs or otherwise contributes to the sense of its own occasions and contexts (Lynch 1993). Communicative activity is context shaped and context renewing, and this is a major and unavoidable procedure which hearers use and rely on to interpret conversational contributions and attend to in the design of what they say (Lynch 1993; Edwards 1997). In this sense, this reading stands in contrast to any cognate or foundational understanding of reflexivity, where the notion of self-conscious, self-reflection continues to trade in essentialist notions of individual subjectivity. The difference between the currently fashionable use of reflexivity and the formulation I make here, is that the former *is* avoidable, given that it is postulated as a self-conscious act, the latter is not (Lynch 2000).

Whilst the concepts of indexicality, reflexivity, intersubjectivity and accountability furnish ethnomethodology with its perspective, they have also lead to some thorny 'philosophical' issues, which now beset ethnomethodology's programme. It is to these matters, touched on in the introduction to this thesis that I will now turn.

Producing an adequate account of the social world, Ethnomethodology and natural observational science

(i) *Ethnomethodology and the 'commonsense perspective'*

All sociological description is charged with the production of an adequate account or observation of the social world. Inherent in any description of the social world, is the apparent task of achieving correspondence, as stated previously between the 'subject and object'. The issue of correspondence has received huge interest and debate in discourses of the posts³⁷ and whilst ethnomethodologists have attempted to avoid such meta-theoretical debates by a focus on the empirical, close examination of ethnomethodological studies reveals a number of tensions within the ethnomethodological camp (Lynch 1993; Lynch and Bogen 1994). One central critique of ethnomethodology is that whilst it has made significant contributions to understanding *how* conventional social scientists achieve correspondence between

³⁷ The 'crisis of representation' arises from the profound challenge to the assumption that language simply represents 'reality' in transparent and equivocal ways. Collecting transcribing and interpreting data all become constructive or constitutive activities as the researcher is faced with awareness that there can be no direct apprehension of or representation of the life world. This crisis of representation raises the issue of *standpoint*, a term or concern that has now gained widespread interest in texts of social research, see for example Harding (1987).

subject and object, it has overlooked the irredeemable reflexivity of the ethnomethodologist's own account.

Ethnomethodology has taken as a substantive field of inquiry, the social organisation of 'conventional' social scientific practices. An argument often cited by ethnomethodologists drawing on Baccus (1986), is the notion that conventional sociologists make use of 'signs' or commonly understood 'indicators', in approaching and making sense of the social world (we are reminded here of the use of ICD-10 by Meltzor et al. 2000). The thrust of the ethnomethodological discussion is that indices such as 'social class' or 'gender' or 'ethnicity' are used as reference to the social world or as Baccus stated, provide for the 'visibility criterion' of the real world (1986, p18). Thus accounts of the social world are 'mediated accounts', co-produced as a consequence of 'sign-reading activity'; the sign stands "between" the interpreter and the object or social world' (Benson and Hughes 1991, p125). Ethnomethodologists have drawn attention to such ethnomethods in and through which the social theorist provides for the 'real-worldly character' of the social phenomenon in question and achieves correspondence between subject and object (Baccus 1986, p18). These ethnomethodological descriptions and observations of the social practices of social research have very usefully served to debunk any notions of social scientific accounts as 'objective' accounts. In understanding that social scientific accounts are socially organised, facts, truths, findings all become accomplishments that are achieved in and through reference to an agreed language, terminology and methods of conventional social science. Sacks, for example, in his much referenced paper 'Sociological Description' (1963), refers to 'recognition criteria' as part and parcel of how social scientists achieve the validity of accounts.

What is critical in Sacks's concept of recognition criteria is that how criteria are constituted rests on a shared language, which drives the social practices of social scientists. However, whilst ethnomethodologists share in an understanding of the reflexivity or social organisation of social-scientific accounts, there is either an explicit or implicit suggestion in many texts that somehow ethnomethodologists can get beyond this perspective. Sacks, for example, stated that he shared in the conventional social scientist's aspirations of science and indeed in subsequent work talked of his methods as offering or opening up the possibility of a 'natural observational science'(Sacks 1984 & 1992, LC4, p27). Clearly there is a tension and paradox in this line of thinking, in that on the one hand Sacks retains an understanding of reflexivity, but at the same time suggests that somehow the ethnomethodologist can get outside the vernacular and practices of ordinary language use. This inconsistency is particularly prevalent in ethnomethodological studies, which focus on the 'common-sense' perspective of conventional social-scientific accounts (Zimmerman and Pollner 1971)

Given the central tenets of an ethnomethodological perspective outlined in the previous section, truth claims or more generally reference and expression are always reflexive, endogenous to the settings in which they are produced. Given this central premise, assertions of offering something over or beyond the commonsense perspective are flawed and theoretically unsustainable. This is a conclusion, which is clearly summarised by Barnes and Law;

'... if we are correct, criticisms of "conventional sociology" by ethnomethodologists are at best criticisms of sins of omission.... we must

regard the practice of ethnomethodology itself as beyond justification in any other way than a circular way, which involves its own practice as a criterion of judgement' (1976, p236).

Thus, texts which aim to look at the 'natural' or 'actual', or somehow get at phenomena unmediated, require some reconsideration³⁸. As Button observed ethnomethodology offers 'no corrective' to positivist methodology or indeed any other method in the conventional social sciences (1991, p7) and as Lynch clearly explicates, given ethnomethodology's first lesson, there is no time out from 'the vernacular and practices of ordinary language use'.

(ii) *Ethnomethodology: an epistemic focus*

An inherent tension which besets some of ethnomethodological studies is that ethnomethodologists, on the one hand reject notions of transcendental standards, truths or perspectives in favour of a perspective which commences from an understanding of the social organisation of accounts and practices, but at the same time hold dear to a notion of unmotivated looking or natural observational science (which somehow gets to *the* phenomena). What is confusing or lost in this search for 'the phenomena' is ethnomethodology's *epistemic* focus. It is important to underscore that ethnomethodology as envisaged by Garfinkel is not a quest for a superior vantage point or epistemology; rather the focus is on *epistemic* matters. The particular distinctive contribution that ethnomethodology makes, lies in its *epistemic* focus. It is this focus, which as Button writes (1991) marks the difference between

³⁸ See my comments in the previous chapter.

ethnomethodology and all other sociological perspectives which 'are organised in accordance with the stable foundations' of conventional sociology (p4). In the context of the present study, it is not that I aim to offer any 'better' apprehension of the life-world. Rather, I aim to bring help-seeking decision-making and its accountable properties into focus, by taking epistemic matters, to do with selecting, judging, prioritising and so forth, as a starting point.

Lynch has drawn attention to the scientific tendencies inherent in the CA programme. Inherent in the literature specific to CA, is a desire to 'remove' the researcher from the research process, to work with 'naturally occurring phenomena' and thus to implicitly provide an empiricist reading or close examination of *the* phenomena. Given the approach taken in this thesis, it is important to distance my work from this trend, (and the empiricist thread of Sacks's work), and to make clear that although I too focus on the sequential organisation of talk, the focus of this work is *epistemic* rather than epistemological. Ethnomethodology's focus centres on social practices and the accounts of those practices; ethnomethodologists are directed towards description of the reflexivity of accounts as situated activities and socially organised with no time out. Ethnomethodology offers a distinctive approach to understanding knowledge production, rather than any *transcendental site* for knowledge production. It is in this context, and on account of ethnomethodology's epistemic focus that it provides a method for thinking about *how* social actors invoke, select or make relevant categories of help-providers reflexively in relation to the topic 'help-seeking'.

Sacks and Membership Categorisation Analysis.

(i) *The centrality of categorisation in the co-production of social order*

Sacks was a collaborator of Garfinkel, his ethnomethodological roots are evident in his interest in practical reasoning and the *co-production* of social facts, rather than 'the facts themselves'. Of particular interest to Sacks was what he referred to as the inference making machinery of practical reasoning; the machinery of on-going, situated 'fact' production. In this study, it is the work of Harvey Sacks, which has been specifically selected as providing a technology of analysis for analysing situated decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking'.

Sacks's work on 'membership categorisation' arose from his aim to offer an original perspective on the methods persons use in *doing* social life (Sacks 1966, 1992). Sacks argued that a key device or method people used in order to accomplish the social world was that of *generating* categories. For Sacks, categorisations and their devices, formed part of the common-sense framework of members' methods and recognisable capacities of practical sense making (LC6, 1992). He was particularly interested in how social actors make sense of the world and the systematic methods that participants deploy in categorisation work.

In keeping with an ethnomethodological perspective, Sacks's aim was to describe the frequently unnoticed *organising* properties of social reality. He noted that whilst it was commonplace in social research to be interested in categories, the categories that usually drew the attention of the social researcher were those that the social

researcher either assumed as relevant *a priori* to the data, such as 'gender' or 'social class', or imposed inductively on data sets (see my observations chapter 1). Sacks's work on MCA aimed to offer an alternative approach to the *tacit* use by researchers of what ethnomethodologists refer to as 'members categories', as Sacks writes,

'All sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some category in. They may make sense to us in doing that, but they're doing it simply as another member (LC6, p41-2, 1992).

Whilst, as I outlined above, Sacks's aspirations towards a 'natural observational science' are questionable, Sacks also and importantly for this study, shared in the critique of conventional sociology, which centres on what Barnes and Law referred to as the 'sins of omission' (1976). Sacks came to reject much of the 'conventional methods' of social science on the basis that social scientists failed to grapple with the fine detail of interaction; the social organisation of practical reasoning and communication. Sacks argued that instead of appeals to 'social structure', 'culture' or other macro-level starting points, the analyst needed to look at what individuals *do* in situations of practical reasoning. Concepts such as 'culture' or 'structure' rush the analyst to explanation, before the particulars of phenomena are understood and/or barely described. Sacks therefore urged a move away from familiar categories such as 'gender' or 'class', towards the principle that no category of sociological description should be used in such a manner as to neglect the commonsense ways in which members themselves use it for practical purposes (LC6, p41-42, 1992).

For Sacks, the central analytic focus was on the sequential and categorical aspects of talk and communicative interaction. In focusing on categories-in-use, what makes something accountable is not some categorical map of the social world, but rather correct use and hearing of categories, observed in situations of practical reasoning and communication. Correct category selection in situated decision-making is therefore something to be discerned analytically, from participants' treatment of categories as contextually and interactionally correct. The analyst's focus is on how members use categories; their use becomes a topic of enquiry and not merely an unexplicated resource in analysis and description.

(ii) *Ethnomethodology, CA and MCA: domains of focus*

Sacks's work has inspired two subsequent traditions in social research, that of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) and Conversation Analysis (CA). Given that the focus of this work is on MCA, it is important to distinguish the domain of focus of MCA from the related, and to some extent overlapping, focuses of ethnomethodology and CA. In thinking about the practical differences between MCA, CA and Ethnomethodology, it is useful to think about the difference in terms of the level of activity to which the analysis is directed (Eglin and Hester 1992). Taking for, example studies, of patient-doctor interaction, an ethnomethodological perspective would focus on explicating the work of being or doing patient-doctor interaction; the rules that circumscribe this activity. In contrast, studies using MCA would take as a focus *practical reasoning*, (for example, judging, inferring, selecting, deciding and so forth) in doctor and patient interaction in terms of membership *categorisation*. CA studies would direct their interest to the sequential

aspects of doctor/patient talk³⁹; the organisation, for example, of question-answer sequences would be the primary concern. What the three 'approaches' hold in common is an interest in how social actors accomplish the social world, however, the domain of relevance is somewhat differentiated. Given MCA's potential for unpacking members' methods of inferring, judging, selecting and so forth, it is this approach which was considered most useful for the present study of situated decision-making.

Sacks's work is frequently described as a theoretical approach, however, as Sacks was at pains to point out in his thesis (1966), the conceptual apparatus of MCA aims not to provide 'some sort of vocabulary or merely a 'way of talking about some behaviour' (p13). In contrast, his approach aimed to,

'systematically develop a rigorous, methodological set of procedures for understanding how the actor interprets (reports upon, views, hears others' reports, etc.) the environment he confronts and discusses' (1966, p13).

In his thesis he aimed to offer 'empirical demonstrations' of the operation of membership categorisation (1966, p13). Sacks offered his work as a toolbox, for describing and understanding the machinery of practical reasoning.

The key purpose or aim of studies which make use of the descriptive apparatus of MCA, is to explicate the principled selection procedures, the means in and through which social actors make relevant one category or device over another. Whilst

³⁹ I have taken this analysis from Eglin and Hester (1992, p263) who have usefully drawn out the subtle analytic differences between MCA, CA and Ethnomethodology.

Sacksian approaches to describing the social world are often considered as 'micro' approaches, central to application of the technology of MCA is the unpacking of systematic procedures, in order to explicate social actors' knowledge and display of social structures.

'This presumed commonsense knowledge of culture is made available through a method by which the ordinary sense of talk and action is made problematic (for the purpose of analysis) and is conceptualised as the accomplishment of local instances of categorical work... The aim of such analysis is to produce formal descriptions of the procedures which persons employ in particular, singular occurrences of talk and action ' (Hester and Eglin 1997, p3).

(iii) The convergence problem of categorisation

Central to the conceptual framework of MCA is what Sacks refers to as the 'convergence problem of categorisation' or the 'relevance' problem (1966, p18). Sacks formulated the convergence problem as the pervasive problem in conversation of choosing between categories. Given that the social world is inter-subjectively available, social actors are directed to producing an adequate account of the social world in communicative activity, and this rests on resolution of the convergence problem of categorisation or correct category ascription/selection.

Sacks argued that where there is available one device, or one collection of categories that can be used to categorise any group (for example, in help-seeking decision-making), then this poses for participants the convergence problem. Thus the analytic focus of MCA is on how the social actor resolves the convergence problem. The

analyst explicates something of social actor's understanding of commonsense social structures, which guide his or her negotiation of the social world, as manifest in communicative activity. Sacks was interested in the socio-logic of category *use* and argued that use of any category required selection of a correct category; correct in the sense of contextually, relevantly and accountably correct.

The 'occasioned' or 'reconsidered' model of MCA

(i) *Underlining category and sequence*

Sacks's work has spawned two distinct fields of social research, which are Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA). Conversation analysis is clearly the most well developed, focusing on the social organisation and sequential aspects of talk. Developments in the CA field have largely developed and arisen separately from developments in MCA. In Sacks's work, however, attention is drawn to both the *sequential* and categorical aspects of talk, as evidence of the pervasive features of social organisation. Subsequently authors such as Hester and Eglin (1997) and Watson (1997), have attempted to reconnect these two fields of somewhat independent research, devising what has now within limited circles, come to be known as the 'occasioned' or 'reconsidered' model of MCA. Hester and Eglin's observed that developments in CA have tended to be favoured at the expense of fruitful developments in MCA,

‘ there is an overwhelming preoccupation with the positioning of utterances as units of speech relative to one another...This focus has, we suggest, been at

the expense of the categorical aspects of conversation... We would suggest that both the sequential and categorical aspects of social interaction inform each other' (Hester & Eglin 1997, p2).

According to proponents of the reconsidered model of MCA, the preoccupation with sequential aspects of talk, neglects the importance of categorical aspects of talk in understanding communicative interaction. Hester and Eglin (1997) aimed to draw together the categorical and sequential aspects of talk and underlined the distinction between MCA and cognate models of inquiry⁴⁰ which deal with categories, and categorisation. They argued that within Sacks's work there is an ambiguity which centres on Sacks's reference to categories as 'stores of knowledge'. In their reconsidered model of MCA Hester and Eglin (1997) have highlighted the importance of considering categories-in-use or the *situated* work of categorisation. The authors have underlined aspects of Sacks's original ethnomethodological formulation of category relevance/achievement as a contextual endeavour. From this

⁴⁰ Hester and Eglin (1997) have underlined what they refer to as the '*ethnomethodological character*' of MCA, highlighting the distinction between MCA and cognate modes of inquiry common in cognitive anthropology and linguistics (p1). They have argued that MCA directs attention to the 'local instances of categorical ordering work' (1997, p3); this is markedly different from the notion of categories as fixed or finite as in constructive analysis. Hester and Eglin have drawn attention to the work of Goodenough 1957, which is seen to exemplify the cognate tradition or decontextualised models of MCA. They have also extended their criticisms of decontextualised models of MCA to the work of Sacks, arguing that an ambiguity is also discernible in how Sacks describes the apparatus of MCA (for an extended discussion see Hester and Eglin chapter 1, 1997). They write that 'there are various points in his (Sacks) writings which might, unadvisedly, lead one to conclude that Sacks was not wholly averse to a decontextualised model' of MCA (p13). Both CA and MCA are described as being potentially misunderstood as providing 'pre-existing structures of category-organised knowledge which flesh out or contextualise, componential-analytic accounts' (p14). Hester and Eglin, in underlining the indexical character of categorisation work, have articulated a model of MCA which is now variously described as the reconsidered or occasioned model of MCA. They have underlined the importance of an analytic perspective in which the focus is on how category collectivities are *achieved* in talk, for each and every occasion of their relevance/necessity. They write that 'contrary to the decontextualised conception of membership categorisation, as pre-existing structures or 'devices', ethnomethodology stresses that membership categorisation is an activity carried out in local circumstances (p21). To underline the ethnomethodological character of MCA is to emphasise the contrast between proponents of MCA and the cognitive anthropologists who use categories in unexplicated form or as assumed *a priori*. The local and contingent use/achievement of categories-in-context is highlighted.

perspective and in terms of decision-making, decisions are made possible in and through the sequential and categorical achievement of situated talk. Correct category responses can only be treated as correct, where the sequential organisation of talk provides for their correctness or accountability.

The 'reconsidered model' of MCA has been taken up in further studies, such as that of Housley (2003), who talks of categories in context and posits a distinction between a decontextualised model of MCA and an 'occasioned mode' (p29). Housley (2003) states that decontextualised uses of MCA reflect and are reminiscent of the work of Noam Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar (a key influence on Sacks), and the school of cognitive anthropology. Hester and Eglin (1997) state that both the work of cognitive anthropology and the work of Chomsky on transformational generative grammar, seek to provide 'formal accounts of a determinate structure of knowledge which members or speakers-hearers are said to possess for producing meaningful descriptions as a precondition for competent interaction' (Hester and Eglin 1997, p12). For both Hester and Eglin (1997) and Housley (2003), a 'de-contextualised' model of MCA fails to take account of, or fully realise the potential of, an analysis which takes as a premise the local and sequential accomplishment of instances of categorisation. To provide an illustration, one might say, for example, 'he's my friend' or 'or some friend you are'; the meaning of the category 'friend' derives and is achieved from its use in context. From the perspective of an occasioned model of MCA, analytic focus centres on the co-production of situated practical activities in and through, categories and categorisation devices. Clearly any decontextualised model of MCA would be at

odds with the understanding of indexicality outlined earlier. Thus, the reconsidered model of MCA emphasises the *indexical* character of membership categorisation.

(ii) *Watson and the documentary method of interpretation*

Watson's (1997) discussion of membership categorisation is particularly relevant for this thesis, in particular his reference to Garfinkel's 'documentary method of interpretation'⁴¹. Watson takes issue with the direction that CA has taken, pointing out that analysts such as Atkinson and Heritage (1984) pay little attention to the categorical aspects of talk, setting 'categorisation relevancies at zero' (p50). Watson argues that a one-sided focus on the sequential aspects of talk results in a decentring of 'categorisation phenomena' but equally that a one-sided focus on membership categorisation is the game of 'constructive analysts' (p50). As an alternative, Watson suggests that one thinks in terms of Garfinkel's 'documentary method of interpretation'. The documentary method is described as comprising 'a 'family' of lay sense-making practices whereby members conjointly assemble coherence⁴² to an array of particulars by interpreting them in terms of an underlying pattern' (Watson 1997, p55). He argued that reference to the documentary method thus renders the categorical and sequential aspects of talk 'non-extractable' (p56). Logically one must, on the basis of the documentary method of interpretation, refuse any 'sequential organisation/membership categorisation analysis dualism' (p53) and he

⁴¹ See Garfinkel 1967, chapter 3.

⁴² Watson offers the following example 'with regard to say doctor-patient talk the documentary method helps us analytically elucidate the reflexive relation of the categorical and sequential 'takes' on sensible conversational order. The categorical aspects of the conversation comprise one indexical particular, utterance form and sequence (conversational format) comprise the others: these (at least may) all, severally and collectively, be taken as pointing to an imputed underlying pattern whose proper gloss is for instance, 'a medical consultation'. In turn the 'feedback' from that pattern lends coherence to the categorical and 'structural' aspects of the talk, such that those aspects are individually and as an ensemble informed by the gloss' (1997, p55-56).

concludes that, on this basis, we arrive at 'a more inclusive methodological rubric'⁴³ (p57).

For those who adhere to a reconsidered model of MCA, analysis of categorisation work starts from an appreciation of *in situ* contextual achievement of social order. Housley writes this is quite a different perspective from 'a restraining view of context as an unspoken, reified parameter that informs or influences the interactional display of categories in conversation' (2003, p29). The fundamental difference lies in what Housley succinctly concludes as '*context is not imposed, it is achieved*' (Housley 2003, p20, emphasis added).

Categories and social order

Use of the technology of MCA often meets with accusations of 'so what' from other social scientists, as the MCA technologist presents findings that may seem so mundane as to be uninteresting. MCA is not seen as addressing the 'real' issues of the macro-social order and social structure. The focus of Sacks's work and subsequent studies which make use of the technology of MCA is, however, very much on the workings of 'society' or 'social order'. The departure such as Sacks, or Hester and Eglin make from conventional sociology, lies not in disputing the relevance of social order, but rather the methods or starting point for investigating this order.

⁴³. I make reference to Watson's work in chapter 7, in particular Watson's extension of Sacks's concept of category-bound activities towards an understanding of category or *conversationally-generated* activities.

The Parsonian (1937) approach to understanding social structure has long dominated sociological research, with a concern to stipulate *theoretically* (global) social structures or 'categories' of social order. In contrast, MCA studies posit an apposite approach to the theoretical-analytic Parsonian legacy, with studies arriving at a description of social order from within. Focusing on categorisation and the sociology of categories in use cannot be seen as departing from an interest in social order and organisation. Rather, it is to take an alternative approach to social order that does not require the stipulation of macro-level concepts, *a priori*. Coulter's seminal paper entitled '*Human practices and the observability of the "macrosocial"*' (1996), provides much of the methodological work necessary for dealing with the relevance of the macro/micro debate for ethnomethodological work. For Coulter, ethnomethodology and MCA collapse the distinction between macro and micro, in that the focus of analysis is on the display or co-production of 'macro' order as it is occasioned in social actors' work of categorisation.

Subsequent proponents of MCA equally underline MCA's potential for explicating social order. In Jayyusi's seminal work 'Categorisation and the Moral Order', she writes that a consideration of categories in use,

'opens up areas for detailed study and sociological description that go far beyond the mainstream ethnomethodological concern with conversational sequencing and conversational activities, although rigorously grounded in that. It results in the systematic uncovering of various cultural conventions that enable the production of sense, or practical actions, and that inform the

organisation of social relations and the various practices of social life’
(Jayyussi 1986, p2).

Jayyusi’s work has located social actors’ work of categorisation firmly in and constitutive of a moral order, she makes clear that her work is about understanding and describing how members’ sense of wider social structures and culture ‘impinge upon everyday social interaction’(Jayyussi 1984, p35). Jayyusi, whilst dismissing the notion of any categorical maps which govern behaviour, makes clear her standpoint that, local configurations of categories and categorisation appeal to wider social processes, concerns and factors.

Central to Hester and Eglin’s reconsidered model of MCA is an interest in culture-in-action (1997). The reconsidered model of MCA outlined above aims to consider the display of social order ‘from within’ by focusing on both the sequential *and* categorical co-production of social order. Thus, one might argue that ethnomethodology indeed shares with its conventional counterparts an interest in such things as ‘culture’, or ‘norms’, but as Housley writes, ‘what is normal is *locally* configured’ (Housley 2003, p34).

Whilst I sketch out here something of the thinking of MCA in abstract form, in order to make this approach more accessible I will conclude this chapter with a brief overview of Sacks’s work ‘Search for help’ which provides an illustration of how the tools of MCA can be brought to bear on the study of social order.

Harvey Sacks and 'Search for Help'.

In his thesis (1966), Sacks focused on the *social organisation* of help-seeking, studying transcripts of telephone conversations between the staff in an emergency psychiatric clinic and either suicidal persons or acquaintances of them. Sacks posed in the opening paragraphs of his thesis his 'empirical problem' (p1), which he stated as 'How is it that a suicidal person can come to find that he has no one to turn to for help?' (p1). Tracing trajectories in talk, Sacks observed that in these conversations, callers and the clinic staff both co-produced a normative *order* to help-seeking, which rendered the frequent questions from the clinic staff such as, "where is your wife?", or "what about your mother?", both expectable and reasonable. That certain categories of help-providers should be turned to first in the search for help, provided for the relevance and inter-subjective sense of such questions. Sacks argued that obligations to help were organised around certain *standardised-relational pairs* (SRPs), such as husband-wife, mother-daughter, friend-friend or neighbour-neighbour. The 'standardisation' of these relational pairs in terms of the provision of help, provided for the patterns in talk that he observed, but also the suicidal person's problem of 'no one to turn to'. When Sacks used the term 'standardised' he referred to an observation that an individual could enquire of another "where is your mother?" or "can't your wife help you?" purely on the basis of routine expectations about relational pairs and without knowing the details of an individual's relationships. If a social actor was known to be an incumbent of a paired-relational category such as husband-wife, then any other social actor could properly and routinely infer that he or she could seek help from his or her spouse. Thus, from Sacks's analysis of his data, standardised relational pairs such as husband-wife or

mother-child were described as *inferentially* rich in terms of expectations and obligations to provide or receive help.

In discerning the co-production of a normative order to help-seeking, Sacks also observed that in terms of standardised relational pairs, any social actor in categorising the social world would select from available standardised relational pairs in a particular sequence. That is, for any social actor there would be available a particular relational pair which would stand in *first-position* (candidates who have the 'strongest' obligations to provide help). From his data Sacks argued that routine inferences could be drawn about spouses, such that the SRP husband-wife, for example, was routinely considered a first position candidate pair in the search for help. Sacks was not suggesting that for each and every occasion an individual's first pair priority *would* be 'husband-wife', but rather that the social world is organised around normative expectations such that inferences can routinely be made about candidates for first position pairs.

Sacks was also interested in how an individual collects together or clusters categories into sets, which appear to naturally go together (LC6, 1992). Sacks argued that in any conversation, participants made use of membership categorisation devices (MCD)⁴⁴ to cluster together categories. In conversations about help-seeking, when a social actor for example uses the device 'family', this is a short cut way of

⁴⁴ Hester and Eglin have identified expressions of *decontextuality* in Sacks's work. They write of Sacks's conceptualisation of MCDs in particular, that 'membership categorisations are endowed with a thing-like quality, lying behind, pre-existing their use in particular instances of membership categorisation. The machinery can be understood as a decontextualised machinery, an apparatus to be taken up and used and which is a pre-formed resource for doing description' (p15). In the following chapters I take up these observations further in considering the local achievement of the collectivity/MCD 'family', in my transcripts.

referring to all the categories (mother, father, sister, brother and so on) that constitute the family.

In Sacks's thesis, he also introduced the phrase *programmatic relevance*. When Sacks used this phrase, he referred to an observation that where a device was rendered relevant, for example 'the family' in the case of suicide, then the categories that constitute that device become programmatically relevant. Sacks writes,

'When for whatever reason, some membership categorisation device is made relevant... then the categories of that device will often be accorded a pervasive and continual significance, such that one may properly focus on the fact that there are not incumbents of the various categories of the device' (1966, p43)

Sacks was interested in how, in conversation, where a device or category was programmatically relevant, any social actor could comment on the *absence* of that category. Sacks offered on the topic of suicide that if a suicide had occurred, then a social actor could properly enquire into the whereabouts of family and question why it is that the family had failed to help the suicidal person. Sacks argued that, insights could be drawn about the social organisation of obligations to provide or seek help, by identifying when social actors remark on the absence of a given category:

'The notice of non-incumbency is not an altogether straight forward matter. For example, that A may say of B, "you don't have a wife?" might be something to which B could properly respond, "No, but I don't have a houseboy or a lover, or a lot of money- I don't have lots of things." How is it

that the question “you don’t have a wife as against, say not having a chauffeur, becomes properly noticed, spoken of, worried about, proposed as some trouble, and the rest? (Sacks 1966, p43)

Sacks claimed that ‘in this culture’ the device family had an ‘across the board programmatic relevance’ (p43). He observed that the categories that constitute the device family could be properly oriented to at all times, without respect to whether incumbency existed (p43). Sacks observed that in the case of suicide the categories of the device family had a programmatic across the board relevance.

Sacks’s approach to understanding help-seeking focuses on the fine interactional detail of categorisation. Sacks approached the social organisation of help-seeking, by focusing on in situ categorisation work. It was from his observations of categorisation that he arrived at this description of the standardisation of obligations to provide help. For Sacks, that there are normative obligations invoked by standardised relational pairs to provide help, provides for the ‘propriety of engaging in a search for help’ (Sacks 1966, p52).

Summary

In conclusion, ethnomethodology’s epistemic focus offers an alternative focus to conventional sociology. The work of Harvey Sacks, with its roots in ethnomethodology, offers a seminal approach to the analysis of practical reasoning. The descriptive apparatus of MCA offers the social analyst an alternative approach to the conventional methods of social science, taking as a focus the local and categorical organisation of talk.

Sacks's thesis 'Search for Help' (1966) remains much neglected by those who conduct research in health and welfare, despite its unique insights on the social organisation of help-seeking. In this thesis and over the subsequent chapters I aim to show how insights from his work, and from those who have developed the field of MCA, can provide a standpoint and method for exploring decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking'. Having outlined in this chapter the analytic frameworks selected for this study, in the next chapter I will explore in some detail the analytic tools used for this study, with applied illustrations.

Chapter 4

Introducing the descriptive apparatus of MCA: analytic tools, process of data analysis and presentation

Introduction

‘ What the sociologist ought to seek to build is an apparatus which will provide for how it is that any activities, which Members do in such a way as to be recognisable as such to Members, are done, and done recognisably. Such an apparatus may be called a ‘culture’ ’ (Sacks, LC1 p245, 1992).

The majority of this chapter is devoted to explaining in some detail, via applied illustrations, how the descriptive apparatus of MCA can be used to unpack situated practical reasoning. I aim to show how MCA provides, for the present study, a standpoint and method for understanding the social organisation of research participants situated decision-making, in the context of the topic of help-seeking and child-welfare. In this chapter I will provide a detailed description of the concepts which are central to understanding what Sacks refers to, as the inference-making machinery of MCA. In addition, I will provide a brief description of the process of working with the initial draft transcripts and decisions taken about the presentation of the data, in preparation for chapters 5 – 9 that follow.

To introduce the central concepts which have been used to analyse the research materials, two extracts of data taken from data-set one are used for purposes of

illustration. A short extract (extract 4:1⁴⁵) provides the analytic focus for the introduction of the key concepts or descriptive apparatus of MCA, whilst a second longer extract is used (extract 4:2) to highlight MCA's focus on the local and contingent organisation of categorisation work.

MCA: some basic concepts

As a way into considering the centrality of categorisation of persons⁴⁶ in practical reasoning I commence with a short extract below, in which participants are debating the relevance of one category of help-provider over another. This extract is taken from a transcript from a focus group in which four women have been asked to respond to the vignette (Appendix 2) and consider whether the 'family' need help from child-welfare agencies. Whilst the vignette provided limited details about the family or characters in the scenario, what is discernible across the extract is that participants can *fill in* the detail and assemble *in situ* the facts of the case, which then enable them to make decisions about sources of help.

Extract 4:1

R: Can I just ask you to lean over this tape a bit, because otherwise it won't pick it up.- Do you think there are any problems that the family need help with?

A: Not that//

C: Outside the home? - No probably not=

A: =no it's just like a normal family situation now - you know//

B: No, it's just a normal family (.) sounds like a normal family now=

C: =like a normal family now//

A: Dunnit now? - You know=

B: =normal situation//

C: Normal situation, yeah

B: And she's got her mother and sisters to talk to, if she feels that she needs to thrash it out with somebody. It's not as if she needs counselling or anything because they do that don't they - the extended family do that you know.

(Transcript FG1)

⁴⁵ All extracts of data presented in this thesis are labelled according to the chapter number and then their sequential appearance in the individual chapter.

⁴⁶ Others have extended the Sacksian apparatus to consider categorisation of non-personal objects – see Hester and Eglin for a summary of this work (1997, p3).

From a reading of extract 4:1 above, it is observable that:

- a) Participants can co-produce an analysis of the problem as a 'normal family problem' and can make comparison between this family and other normal families.
- b) Participants can select between categories of help and say that 'she' (Jenny) can seek help from her mother and sisters (even though these were not offered *a priori* as candidates for help in this instance by the researcher).
- c) Participants can dismiss certain categories of help such as 'counsellors or anything' (again, even though there was no mention of counsellors in the vignette or from myself).

This account, which appears to proceed without hesitation or question, raises the issue of, *how* is it that participants are able to make decisions about preferred sources of help in this extract? Participants can dismiss help from 'counsellors' and also state (without knowledge of the particulars of the case) that Jenny can seek help from her mother and sisters. Without knowing, seeing, or having only limited information about Jenny and her family, participants can make decisions about the help that Jenny can expect from her mother and sisters. Given that participants in this extract appear to share in the intelligibility of the account, as Sacks writes, there must exist some kind of 'machinery' which provides for the apparent ease of this co-production (Sacks LC14, p113, 1992). Thus, following Sacks, I ask as an analytic starting point, how are such 'possible descriptions'⁴⁷ generated? (Sacks, LC 1, p237, 1992). Sacks's machinery of MCA can provide a way of answering such questions

⁴⁷ A description can be described as a possible description from its treatment by co-conversationists as a 'possible description'. Sacks argued that the inference making machinery of membership categorisation is central to the production by members of 'possible' descriptions, that is 'recognisable' descriptions, (see LC1, pp236-242, 1992 'the baby cried . the mommy picked it up' for further on this).

and explicating how categorisation is socially organised so as to provide the resources for *filling* in a context, hypothesising, making predictions and thus selecting between ‘help-providers’ as is displayed across extract 4:1 above.

MIR

Sacks referred to categorisation as the apparatus of practical reasoning and in his lectures introduced the apparatus⁴⁸ of MIR, the acronym standing for M-membership, I inference-rich, and R- representative (LC6, p41, 1992). Sacks observed that categories are ‘*inference-rich*’, that is, on the basis of any category ascription⁴⁹ one can infer a number of, attributes or behaviours about a person (LC6, p41, 1992). Sacks stated that ‘a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored⁵⁰ in terms of these categories’ (LC6, p40, 1992). Thus, categories-in-use provide for certain observable trajectories in talk, which are inter-subjectively available and expectable, on the basis of category selection. In addition any member of a category is ‘*presumptively a representative of that category*’ (LC6 p41, 1992) for the purpose or use of whatever knowledge is stored by reference to that category. On this latter point, Sacks offered the following example:

⁴⁸ Sacks uses the term apparatus to refer to the inferential resources/devices that members use in practical reasoning (1992).

⁴⁹ Proponents of MCA use the term ascription to refer to the work of assigning a member to a category.

⁵⁰ Sacks tended to refer to knowledge as stored in categories (1966, 1992), whereas I have suggested in this thesis that knowledge can be inferred on the basis of situated invocation of a category; knowledge is therefore category-generated.

‘ So for example, a foreigner comes to the United States and you find yourself asking them about the political situation in Ghana, or how they like the food in the United States, without reference to whether they stand as a member of the Gourmet Club of France, or don’t ever eat out, or aren’t interested much in food, or are just ordinary citizens, so to speak. But one finds that its done’ (LC6, p41, 1992).

In choosing between sources of help, one can see on a very simple level, that generating categories of persons, such as doctor, social worker or (as in extract 1 above) counsellor, provides for routine consideration of the conventionally associated helping tasks, practices and activities of those occupational categories. As Jayyusi states, such organisational/institutional group category concepts, deliver the criterial feature of the category in the name itself. In the case of counsellor, for example, this categorisation provides for consideration of helping practices which centre on talking, listening, advising. Thus, one can see how such categories can be put to work in considering relevance of one category over another in situated decision-making. Given what Sacks refers to as *presumptive representativeness*, one can make such inferences without knowledge of a particular individual in terms of circumstances or behaviours, but purely in terms of what can be inferred on the basis of the category-incumbency⁵¹. In this way members can go about making new knowledge (Sacks LC6, p41, 1992).

Clearly there are other categories-in-use that do not have designated practices, competencies or skills regarding the provision of (occupation-related) help ‘built

⁵¹ To say that someone is an incumbent is to say that they have been assigned to or can be seen on this occasion as belonging to a particular category. Thus we can talk about category incumbency- which means belonging to a particular category.

into'⁵² the name, but can still be suggested as a source of help. In the above extract, for example, participants have no problem and can say straight off⁵³ that Jenny can seek help from her mother or her sisters. Clearly such categories are also *inferentially rich* in relation to the provision of help and this centres on what I will consider in some detail as the organisation of *standardised-relational* categories.

Standardised-Relational Pairs (SRPs)

Sacks's thesis argues that persons can be categorised as incumbents (belonging to) various opposite SRPs pairs such as mother-daughter, husband-wife, and neighbour-neighbour. Such relational pairs constitute a locus for a set of rights and obligations regarding the provision of help. Again, Sacks's key point is that such SRPs are inferentially rich. The notion of standardisation derived from his observation that any competent member, knowing only that X is a member of the relational pair X-Y, can enquire as to why X does not seek help from Y and visa versa. Thus, to mention or refer to one side of a relational pair is to render the other side of the pair 'programmatically present' (Eglin and Hester 1997, p244).

Returning to extract 4:1 above, note how participant C proposes that Jenny can seek help from her mothers and sisters and how this proposition is made on the basis of:

- a) Limited information about Jenny's relationship with her mum and sisters;
- b) Without enquiring further into Jenny's relationship with her mum and sisters;

⁵² See my comments footnote 10 this chapter.

⁵³ The expression 'straight' off is from Sacks- Sacks used this expression to refer to statements that were made without elaboration, treated by speakers and hearers as non-treatable, non-repairable statements.

- c) Expressed as a factive;
- d) Encounters no question or challenge from co-conversationists.

This utterance from C and the displayed accountability of this response, illustrates that C is drawing on ‘what everyone knows’ about the social organisation of standardised relational pairs. This response illustrates (i) that SRPs pairs that are constituted *in situ* as incumbents of the device ‘family’ are routinely treated as inferentially rich regarding the provision of help and (ii) that such inference-making activity in reasoning is socially organised and socially *sanctioned*.

As the following chapters will reveal, in the context of focus group and interview conversations about help-seeking, normative assumptions which arise from the social organisation of SRPs provide a key resource for participants and researcher alike, in conversation about help-seeking. Routine assumptions made on the basis of category incumbency, together with contingencies of situated talk, provide for the *normative* reflexivity of on-going discourse or conversation and the fact that on the basis of SRPs, certain category-predicated helping activities can be routinely presupposed.

Categories and category-bound activities

In order to further delimit how it is that categories or categorical pairs *are* inferentially rich, it is necessary to further outline the machinery of MCA and consider the notion of categories and ‘*category-bound activities*’⁵⁴. Sacks formulated

⁵⁴ In the chapters that follow I underline the importance of considering category-bound activities as *treated as or displayed* as category-bound, rather than considering activities as bound ‘for all time’ to certain categories.

the notion of category-bound activities, observing that on the basis of any one category, certain kinds of activities can be routinely associated with this category (LC12, p582-583, 1992). Wattam (1996), referring to the work of Sacks, writes that 'categories and their members have a 'cluster' of expected activities or behaviours, traits or characteristics associated with them'; this is not to suggest that categories are fixed or finite, but rather 'use of categories displays a normative concern for what is expectable or predictable about the social world' (1996, p147);

'this is not to say that every incumbent of a given category behaves in the same way, but rather there are certain actions or behaviours which, if they were performed by an incumbent of a given category, would not be considered unusual. In the absence of any other information, there is a tendency to interpret information in these terms' (Wattam, p147, 1996).

Thus, deploying an occupational category of helper such as 'nurse', one 'automatically' thinks of the practices and activities that are associated with this occupational group. What is particularly important is that given the notion of *presumptive representativeness*, participants in the context of extract 3:1, or more generally social actors orient to what can be inferred about a class rather than an individual (Sacks, LC6, p40-41, 1992). Jayyusi highlights this point:

'it is the features of a perceived class of persons that are relevant and thus displayed as relevant not the features of various 'individuals'...what is involved here is a transpersonal projection of expectable actions' (Jayyusi, p24-25, 1984).

Thus, to consider the questions posed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, it is via this machinery, the social organisation of *in situ* categorisation, that members can go about producing new knowledge (in the absence of detail or particulars) and assemble the 'facts' of the case.

Co-selection of category and activity

In further examining the organisation of how categories work in terms of tied⁵⁵ activities, it is also important to consider what Sacks refers to as the principle of *co-selection*. Sacks observed that categories selected to categorise some member performing a category-bound activity and categories selected to categorise that activity are *co-selected*, that is that social actors 'automatically' consider that certain activities go together with certain categories. This preference for co-selection provides for the correct or appropriate description or hearing of events and enables participants to deal with ambiguity (Sacks, LC2, p252-258, 1992). Returning to the extract 4:1, it is possible to see that talk often proceeds on the basis of what Sacks calls 'condensed'⁵⁶ speech; such instances of condensed speech both a) provide for potential ambiguity of meaning/reading and b) as a prerequisite require that there is some apparatus in place to deal with this ambiguity. Returning to the last utterance of extract 4:1, C states '*it's not as if she needs counselling or anything because they*

⁵⁵ 'tied' as in on this occasion, conversationally constituted as 'tied', rather than set for all time.

⁵⁶ Proponents of MCA draw attention to instances of condensed speech- condensed speech is used to refer to utterances in which the social actor does not fully explicate/articulate what he means, he does not fully say or explicate what he means, because of his or her awareness that resources are in place to deal contextually with ambiguity that might arise from this organisation of speech. This is also what Garfinkel refers to as the documentary method of interpretation (1967).

do that, don't they- the extended family'. The participant makes a statement which includes an instance of condensed speech 'they do *that*', whilst she does not spell out either what 'that' is and also uses what might be seen as an ambiguous reference to 'anything', the parties to the focus group, the reader of this thesis, or any other competent member, has no problem in making sense of her utterance. The social organisation of categorisation provides for inter-subjective assumptions about the helping obligations associated with the categories mother and sisters, without the speaker having to spell out the detail of those obligations finitely. In terms of *co-selection*, this resource of practical reasoning provides for a shared understanding about what '*that*' is. This draws on another key aspect of Sacks conceptual apparatus, which is the hearer's maxim. The social organisation of local categorisation work provides not only for the correct or accountable ways of saying, expressing, or using categories, but also the correct *hearing* and understanding of certain categories-in-use. It is in this way that the social world is inter-subjectively available, and characteristics of communication such as the use of condensed speech and the documentary method of interpretation become possible. The social organisation of category and co-selection thus provides not only for accountable ways of saying, but equally for accountable ways of hearing.

To further illustrate how activities are routinely or normatively tied to certain categories-in-use, Sacks argues that one can observe members initiating 'search procedures'. In my focus groups, when questions were posed about possible sources of help, participants either asked questions pertaining to the availability of family members, for example 'does she have a mother?' (see chapters 5 and 6) or as in

extract 4:1 simply offered that the categories constituted as incumbents of the device family could help.

Conversationally category-predicated activities

Watson (1974, 1976, 1978, 1983, 1986, 1986) has made an important contribution to the body of literature on MCA and his developments of the Sacksian notion of categories and category-bound activities are particularly relevant for my analytic strategy. Watson extended Sacks's notion of category-bound activities to a consideration of *category-predicated activities*. He argued that activities are only one class of predicates that 'can conventionally be imputed on the basis of a given membership category' (Watson, 1978, p106). Other predicates include rights, entitlements, motives, attributes, competencies and knowledge. Watson's development is of particular relevance for researchers who align themselves with the reconsidered model of MCA (Housley, 2003). As stated in the first part of this chapter, there is a potential ambiguity in the work of Sacks, given his reference to categories as 'stores' of knowledge. Both Watson and Jayyusi have drawn attention to the indexical nature of categorisation work and have highlighted the importance of approaching membership categorisation as an 'occasioned' activity. In highlighting the indexical character of categorisation work, Watson and Jayyusi have extended Sacks's notion of category-bound activities and offered that activities can be formulated as tied *in situ*, that is they claim that category predicates can be *conversationally* tied.

‘This notion provides for the way in which member’s category work may build up modes of categorisation through the topic and conversational materials at hand and as they are produced by members in situ... this ...allows for consideration of the way in which members tie predicates to devices and categories in terms of the practicality of such connections and the particular here and now activities oriented to in-talk’ (Housley, 2003, pp 30-31).

In chapter 7 in particular I make clear the relevance of Watson’s development of Sacks’s work on categories and category bound activities. In addition I draw on Jayyusi’s notion of categories as ‘open-textured’. In this context the ‘boundedness’ of category predicates is not only device-sensitive but also *occasioned*. The focus therefore moves away from a consideration of category-bound activities as finite entities or categorical maps, and instead focuses on the occasioned nature of conversationally category-predicated activities. Interest in category-bound activities thus centres on the routine *treatment* by participants of predicates as category bound, as an avenue of analytic inquiry.

Membership Categorisation Devices (MCDs)

Sacks’ work not only provides a way of thinking about how inferences can proceed on the basis of category-incumbency and category-bound activities, but also provides a way of thinking about the kind of machinery for collecting together or clustering categories. Earlier in this chapter I introduced Sacks’s interest in the ‘convergence problem of categorisation’, stating that in Sacks’s thesis (1966) he introduced the ‘problem of convergence’, described as the pervasive problem of

choosing between categories in social interaction. There are two sides to this problem which Sacks named as the 'production problem' and 'the recognition problem' (Hester and Eglin, 1992, p250). Sacks argued that, if there are two individuals going about categorising a person, given that there are on many occasions available choices between categories, then there is a problem 'vis-à-vis' the outcome reproducibility of categorisations. Sacks offered the following example:

'if I see two humans I could call one a man and the other a negro, or one a shortstop and the other a baby' (1966, p24).

Sacks argued that there must be some 'combining rules' for determining which category, on particular occasions, is relevant. Given that any social actor faces the problem of choosing between categories in negotiating the social world (convergence problem), Sacks argued that there must be some method in place, not just for tying activities to categories, but equally for clustering or collecting categories together. He introduced the concept of the MCD as a central resource for dealing with the convergence problem, and later developed this concept by offering the following definition:

'that collection of membership categories, containing at least a category that may be applied to some population, containing at least a Member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population Member and categorisation device member. A device is a collection plus rules of application.' (Sacks, 1972, p32)

To illustrate this point, I will turn to Sacks's now infamous treatment of the phrase 'The baby cried the mummy picked it up'. The sense of this statement depends on the utilisation of the membership categorisation device 'family'. The device 'family', allows members to collect together categories such as 'Mummy', 'baby', 'father', 'son' and so on. In hearing this phrase, individuals will generally assume that it is the baby's mother (and not any mother), that has picked up the baby. As Silverman writes, mummy and baby are 'co-incumbents' of the device 'family' (1998, p81). The sense of this statement relies on orientation to the MCD 'family'. MCDs allow members to collect together, categories which can be conventionally understood or heard as 'going together'. The MCD provides for the resolve of the convergence problem in this instance. MCDs function as organising devices; they provide for the management of indexicality, inference and ambiguity- (unavoidable properties of language in communication) (Lepper 2000). The apparatus of MCD turns out to be a very powerful apparatus, which allows participants to come up with 'workable explanations' about the social world (Silverman 1998, p76).

'The core of competent talk is the capacity to combine categories in recognisable ways and this capacity involves both knowledge about how things go together and the transmission of that knowledge' (Lepper 2000, p20).

Returning to extract 4:1, note the statement 'the family do that'. Whilst the participants do not say whose family; deployment of the MCD family as an organising device provides for the assumption that this means *Jenny's* family. In order to further explicate how this works, Sacks' described a set of combining rules

and these will be considered here in abstract form. In chapters 5 - 9 however, I offer a number of illustrations of how these rules work in talk in an applied sense.

Combining Rules

The Consistency Rule

Sacks refers to 'rules of application' in detailing how categorisation work gets done. Of relevance is Sacks's notion of the 'consistency rule'. Sacks argued that,

‘ it holds that if you are categorising some populations of persons- if a Member is categorising some population of persons- then if they've used one category from some collection for the first person, they're going to categorise, they may – it's legitimate, permissible- to categorise the rest of the population by the use of the same or other categories of the same collection (Sacks, LC1, p238-239, 1992).

If a population of persons is being categorised and a membership category has been used to characterise a first member of that population, then subsequent categorisations are heard as coming from that device. This is how participants are able to make sense of 'the family' in the final utterance in extract 4:1 above. The consistency rule does important work in terms of the management of inference and it is thus implicated in the resolution of both the 'production' and 'recognition' problem of categorisation. MCA is interested in how speakers and hearers deal with

ambiguity. Silverman provides an explication of what Sacks referred to as the consistency rule corollary, which is a *hearing* rule (LC1, p247 1992). Returning to 'the baby cried the mummy picked it up', the consistency rule *corollary* enables hearers to 'correctly' hear two different categories, 'mummy' and 'baby' as coming from the same device 'family' (Sacks, LC1, p247, 1992).

The Economy Rule

Using correct category ascription is a matter of 'adequate reference' (Silverman 1998, p80). The economy rule is implicated in adequate reference and refers to the organisation of categorisation work which allows for the use of 'single categories'. We can use single categories such as 'mummy', 'baby', because we know how they *combine*; that single categories can be used in description and be referentially adequate turns, on the availability of MCDs such as in this instance, 'family'. In extract 4:1 it is the combining rule, which provides for correct understanding of 'the family' in the final utterance; 'mother' and 'sisters' are correctly 'combined' with the device 'family'. Hester and Eglin offer the following further explication of the 'economy rule':

'when a person is, say, introducing a new friend to his or her family it would be interactionally redundant to provide on the occasion of the introduction an extended list of the membership categories with which the friend might be described; one, such as 'a student at Laurier' will do (p4, 1997).

Programmatic relevance

In chapter one I made reference to Sacks' notion of programmatic relevance. To revisit this discussion, Sacks argued that the MCD family was programmatically relevant- that is it had an 'across the board' relevance in conversations (1966, p43). Sacks stated that the programmatic relevance of the device 'family' is displayed in questions such as 'are you married?', 'do you have children?' which can be routinely asked of another and treated as rational-accountable. Any social actor can enquire into another's family status and such questions are routinely expected and accountable. The programmatic relevance of the MCD family also provides for the description of a person as 'childless'; programmatic relevance is also displayed in noticing and remarking on absences such as 'she's not married yet', 'haven't they started a family?' The concept of programmatic relevance has some centrality in this thesis and will be returned to in the chapters that follow.

Using the 'Occasioned Model' of MCA: An applied illustration

The reconsidered model of MCA considers categories-in-use, that is, the analytic focus takes into account both the sequential and categorical organisation of talk. To illustrate this analytic approach, I will draw on an extended extract of data (4:2). The extracts of data are taken from lines 1- 35, where conversation opens at the start of the focus group. Prior to turning on the tape I presented the participants with the vignette and prompted them to commence reading. As the participants spontaneously engage in discussion I turn on the tape to 'catch' this discussion and direct the flow of conversation with an opening statement:

Extract 4:2

1. R: Have you had chance to read it? -. The questions are just to prompt you - we
 2. don't have to follow them - erm- I mean before I turned on the tape and you were
 3. looking at the case study, one of the things you raised was that Mike's not a
 4. Muslim. - I don't know if you want to say anything more about that? - Is that the
 5. first issue that strikes you?
 6. A: That, that's the first issue. It says here 18 months ago he met Sabiha, so why did
 7. Sabiha not tell him to become a Muslim? Because all her children are Muslim, she
 8. herself is Muslim. So why could she not approach Mike and tell him to study the
 9. Koran and then he could become a Muslim - not by forcing him not by any means,
 10. but by asking him - you know. Erm -, you study the Koran and see what it means,
 11. our culture and our beliefs, especially you know what Islam is. He wouldn't have a
 12. clue, he's married Sabiha and he wouldn't have a clue. You know, because these
 13. kids are going to be coming home, having some tea and some biscuits and then
 14. going back to mosque. He wouldn't have a clue (R: he would have no idea), so that
 15. would be my first issue
 16. B: And also for the fact that because he's not a Muslim, how will the outside be
 17. looking at them, as a married couple? - They wouldn't even accept them as a
 18. married couple//
 19. C: They're not married//
 20. B: Yes, I know they're married//
 21. C: It doesn't say they're married//
 22. B: They are, "Sabiha is married...."(participant reads from the vignette)
 23. C: The first thing in Islam, is that, that wouldn't be allowed, because a Muslim
 24. woman cannot marry a non-Muslim. That's the first thing=
 25. B: =that's what I'm saying, they wouldn't accept it//
 26. R: Well she's gone ahead and married him, so maybe her family would have
 27. thought it's better than her being divorced or whatever?
 28. A: Or she may have thought that after married he would convert to Muslim - that
 29. could be a possibility. - Why didn't she want to force him in any way? To become
 30. a Muslim? And it does say that financially he's helped her out of her debts
 31. B: I've got to admit that the family is very supporting because there is a situation
 32. that's in that situation and the family does not give any support//
 33. R: Because she's married a non-Muslim?
 34. B: Yeah, yeah, she's been shut down from all her family friends, community
 35. members whatever, because in Islam they don't accept it.
- (Transcript FG10)

This conversation takes place in a focus group in which the participants have been asked to consider the family's problems and make suggestions about where Sabiha might seek help. Talk opens with participants formulating the problem. The four women and researcher orient to a discussion of whether Mike is a Muslim. This is the 'first issue' and central to their formulation of the family's problems. If we consider the centrality of categorisation, it is possible to see over the course of this extract 'a complex nesting of inferences', arising from situated categorisation work

(Lepper, 2000, p15). Categorisation work is sequentially organised, it is the initial ascriptive work at the start of the extract which provides for the organisation of subsequent categorisation work as the conversation proceeds.

The researcher's first question 'I don't know if you want to say anything more about that?' invites participants to elaborate on their observations that Mike is 'not a Muslim' (lines 3-4). This first question acts to prompt conversation and A responds to this question elaborating on how it is that the differences between Sabiha and Mike are 'the first issue'. In the exchanges that follow assigning Sabiha to the category Muslim and Mike to its binaried opposite - 'not a Muslim' offers a context for subsequent descriptive, ascriptive and predictive work. Given the consistency rule, the statement that Sabiha is a Muslim allows participants to assign her children to the same category 'Muslim' (lines 7-8). This device allows participants to make a number of subsequent and sequentially organised inferential statements about the behaviour of other members of Sabiha's family. At lines 12-14 A makes the following comments about Sabiha's children: *'these kids are going to be coming home, having some tea and biscuits and then going back to the mosque'*. Whilst these details about Sabiha's children are not provided in the vignette, A's expression of this detail as a factive (the children *are*) is not challenged or undercut by responses that follow, rather it is treated as inferentially correct given earlier ascriptive work.

Similarly, that Mike is assigned to the category 'not a Muslim' (lines 3-4) allows A to state of Mike that 'he wouldn't have a clue' (line 14) about the habits and behaviours of Muslims. In addition, earlier ascriptive work allows subsequent

predictions to be made about the behaviour of the extended family 'they wouldn't even accept them as a married couple' (line 17-18).

From the perspective of the reconsidered model of MCA analytic attention is drawn to *in situ* categorisation, which allows co-conversationists to *co-produce* and *assemble* the 'facts' of the case. If we consider categorisation work as sequentially organised then the initial responses from participants about Sabiha and Mike are understood as incorporated into the discussion as factives, thus becoming contingencies for subsequent responses. Subsequent responses about Sabiha's children, Mike and the extended family are co-produced, reflexively, in relation to the initial formulation Muslim/non Muslim. As Jayyusi writes, that categorisation is organised in this way provides for how the social world is 'routinely and unproblematically constituted that way' on each relevant occasion (1984, p181).

To further draw out the *occasionedness* of categorisation work, a further discussion of lines 19-35, is useful. A disagreement emerges between **B** and **C** (lines 19-22) over whether the couple in the vignette are married. **B** returns to the vignette to support her claim that the couple are 'in fact married'; she reads from the vignette to authorise her claim (line 22). What is displayed here and across the exchanges that follow is the *in situ* constitution of an anomaly: a married Muslim/non Muslim couple. This constitution of an anomaly arises out of the participants' displayed *preference* for, and orientation to what is *expectable* about the marital decisions of individuals in this particular community but, in addition, the demands of the occasion which require participants to revise their assessment. The contingencies of this particular conversation reconsider their initial formulation that a Muslim cannot

marry a Non-Muslim. It is important to consider that not only are categories inferentially rich and thus 'strongly protected against induction' (Sacks 1966,1992), but also that categories are locally configured and 'open-textured' (Jayyusi 1984). Across this extract the routine formulation Muslim/non-Muslim is constituted as a key resource in practical reasoning made relevant *in situ* and invoked reflexively in response to this particular focus group's reading of the vignette. Reasoning is organised by the *principle of representativeness* and inter-subjective understandings about Muslims/non-Muslims and how Muslim families operate. Participants are, however, on this occasion forced to revise their routine assumptions as a consequence of, and arising from the contingencies of immediate context (the *in situ* discussion of the vignette). At lines 26-27, I interject to direct the co-conversationists to accept that the couple in the vignette are married, this provides for a new trajectory in talk as participants accept my statement. I use my knowledge of membership categorisation or the standardised relational pair 'researcher-participant' to control the flow of conversation and push the participants to accept that Sabiha and Mike are married. Following my direction participants revise their initial prior categorisation work and begin to accommodate the particulars of the case. Note the comments from **B** at line 28); although **B** accepts the particulars of the case her utterance indicates that this is a *revision* of prior categorisation work- 'I must admit the family is very supportive'. The revision needs to be seen as an occasioned activity of categorisation work where the 'facts' of the case, constituted *in situ* provide for further inferential trajectories. She notes this family's particular circumstances, but marks her response as a revision. It is participants' documentary practices that provide for this utterance from **B**. From my diary notes I noted that the

community researcher said to me after the meeting that it was a problem that we had not made Mike into a Muslim.

Evident across this extended extract is the work of retrospective–prospective practical reasoning; ‘categorisation work and category concepts employed have shifting lines of relevance and are task-dependent’ (Jayussi 1984, p62). Whilst participants in talk display a preference for normative category formulations, categories also have a ‘transformability’ (Jayyusi 1984). Social actors deal with the world as basically orderly and recognisable but inter-subjective knowledge is a resource which is drawn on in contingent and flexible ways. Jayyusi argues that this flexibility is programmatic; it has to do with the interactional contingencies of speaking (Jayyusi 1984). Watson’s notion of conditional relevance is also useful, and underlines the contingent nature of assumption and inference (1997).

Working with the draft content transcripts: Process and presentation.

In commencing work with the draft transcripts, analytic attention focused on the sequential and categorical organisation of talk in keeping with the reconsidered model of MCA. A number of key inferential devices/patterns were initially identified and noted across extracts in talk. Early in analysis, I noted, for example, the sequential co-production of *collectivities*, and that this aspect of categorisation was as a central accountable property of situated decision-making in response to the topic ‘help-seeking’. Chapter 5 reports on ‘collectivity work’ and demonstrates how collectivity work enabled participants to demarcate boundaries between different

'types' of categories of potential categories of help. Initial observations were further verified from repeat analysis of the draft transcripts. The conceptual apparatus of MCA prompted a focus on particular aspects of the data such as use of MCDs, participant co-production of SRPs and so forth. Garfinkel (1967) suggested that transcripts of recorded conversations were used as an 'aid to the sluggish imagination' and this aptly describes how I worked with the research materials. Whilst the organisation of situated decision-making was almost so familiar so as to be not noticeable, detailed analysis of the transcripts enabled the frequently unnoticed organising properties of decision-making to come into view. The focus of analysis always centred on *how* the research participants made adequate sense with the linguistic resources at hand. I have treated myself as an ordinary participant for analytic purposes. I have noted for example, instances in which I shared in the same resources of categorisation as the other participants and given data collection came before data analysis this is a reasonable analytic standpoint.

Analysis has required that aspects of participants' inferential work be artificially separated for illustrative purposes. In order to demonstrate, however, that extracts of data comprise a complex nesting of inferential work, a number of extracts are returned to both in individual chapters and across chapters. The same extract may therefore appear in more than one chapter. No extract will be presented twice in full in the same chapter although repeat reference to an extract may be made within the same chapter. Data extracts are all numbered sequentially within each chapter and according to the chapter number (5:1, 5:2 and so forth). Each transcript has an identifying code and the relationship between the codes applied to individual transcripts and the composition of interviews/focus groups is presented in Appendix

3. The composition of the interviews/focus groups in terms of gender/ethnicity has not made been made an overt part of the discussion in the following chapters, aside from when participants make their position/group composition a relevance.

Analysis has required that certain aspects of situated decision-making be rendered the focus for discussion in the chapters that follow and that other aspects be left out. Inevitably, data analysis requires that decisions are made about aspects of the data which the researcher wishes to render salient. The substantive data analysis is presented sequentially; each chapter builds on the next, carving off aspects of practical reasoning which I have chosen to present and discuss in this thesis.

In the subsequent chapters and using the central concepts from MCA as an analytic toolbox, it is possible to understand how MCA contrasts with conventional methods or interests in categories which condense categorisation work into *a priori* theoretical relevancies. In drawing attention to 'categories in use' as a participant's method, I mark a distinction here between my work and the extant literature on 'help-seeking' that commences from *a priori* analytic categories.

Chapter 5

Situated decision-making and 'collectivity work': demarcating boundaries

'inside' and 'outside' the family

Introduction

The practical demands of both the focus group and interview encounters required that individuals respond to questions about help-seeking and make decisions about appropriate hypothetical sources of help. Participants' responses to and further co-constitution of the practical task at hand, arose from and with reference to these 'here-and-now'⁵⁷ circumstances. In beginning to analyse decision-making in response to the topic 'help-seeking' a first observation that arose from the research materials was that choosing between sources of help presented participants with the convergence problem of categorisation⁵⁸. In the case of personal family problems, participants indicated that multiple categories of help were relevant. Doctors, health visitors, counsellors, social workers, family members and friends were all possible sources of help, requiring social actors to draw on systematic methods for choosing between these sources. The interest here is on how participants in part resolve the convergence problem via *collectivity work*.

⁵⁷ Hester and Eglin write that ethnomethodological studies find themselves taken up with the analysis of language and that 'all talk is a constitutive feature of the circumstances in which it occurs'. They write "EM inevitably treats members' inquiries as locally occasioned, managed and accomplished, within and with reference to the 'here-and-now' circumstances of their production" (p2, 1997).

⁵⁸ I have outlined Sacks's concept of the convergence problem in some detail in chapter 3.

In this chapter I make four key claims:

- Collectivity work is an accountable property of decision-making. Collectivity work enabled participants to achieve boundaries between sources of help and thus, is a key delimiting resource.
- Achieved collectivities, whilst not coterminous with specific category concepts, routinely achieved a boundary 'inside' and 'outside' the family.
- In discussing decision making participants oriented to the MCD family in their collectivity work and this device presents as axiomatic in decision-making.
- Achieved collectivities are open-textured or occasioned.

Collectivity work as a key delimiting resource

Across the research materials, in choosing between sources of help, participants collected together or grouped categories of help-provider into sets, according to the immediate, contextual demands of conversation. To open the discussion I will return to an extract discussed in chapter 4:

Extract 5:1

R: Can I just ask you to lean over this tape a bit, because otherwise it won't pick it up. - Do you think there are any problems that the family need help with?

A: Not that//

C: Outside the home? - No probably not=

A: =no it's just like a normal family situation now - you know//

B: No, it's just a normal family - sounds like a normal family now=

C: =like a normal family now//

A: Dunnit now? - You know=

B: =normal situation//

C: Normal situation, yeah

B: And she's got her mother and sisters to talk to, if she feels that she needs to thrash it out with somebody. It's not as if she needs counselling or anything because they do that, don't they - the extended family do that you know.
(Transcript FG1)

In the previous chapter, in introducing Sacks's conceptual framework, I made some preliminary observations about this extract which centred on the social organisation of practical reasoning around category and category-bound 'helping' activities. I argued that an inter-subjective understanding of the conventional helping activities routinely associated with different category concepts enabled participants to name 'relevant' helpers, such as mother, sister, or counsellor. It is now possible to extend the analysis of extract 5:1 by focusing on *collectivity work*.

Sacks observed that a key aspect of members' categorisation work centred on the collecting together of categories into sets, that members of society propose as going together (1966). Jayyusi stated that 'much of members' theorising is organised through the production of, and provision for collectivities' (1984, p52). In extract 5:1 the opening question from myself prompts thinking about sources of help as displayed across the extract and in the response from C: 'Outside the home?'. C makes clear that sources of help⁵⁹ can be considered in terms of the collectivities 'inside' and 'outside'⁶⁰. Participants make clear that when considering sources of help, multiple sources of help are relevant. The availability of diverse sources of help sets up for participants, the 'convergence problem' of categorisation. In detailing *how* it is that participants dealt with the availability of categories

⁵⁹ Chapter 9 is devoted to a detailed consideration of the reflexively constituted relationship between 'problems' and sources of help. However, my interest here is on collectivity work.

⁶⁰ C formulates a question using the collectivity 'outside'. Given the collectivity is used in a question, it invokes 'inside'. In this instance inside/outside function as a SRP.

(convergence problem), it is possible to observe in operation the co-production of collectivities.

The opening question asks the participants to consider whether the family need help. A's response: 'not that' is interrupted by C, who invites clarification from the researcher, with the question 'outside the home?' This response from C, and the co-produced exchanges which follow, render visible the centrality of collectivity work in dealing with the convergence problem as follows:

- Evidence of the availability of more than one category of help provider is provided for by the necessity of asking 'outside the home?' in response to the researcher's question ('do you think there are any problems the family need help with?').
- Use of the expression 'outside the home', is a way of abbreviating, or not having to list, a range of professional helpers.
- Deciding that help 'outside' the home is not relevant provides for, on this occasion, that a whole range of professional helpers can be dismissed and this is expressed as 'counsellors or anything'.

Thus, in exploring *how* collectivity work presents as a key interactional resource in decision-making, observation of the exchanges across extract 5:1 illustrates that

constituting collectivities in talk served to reduce the multiplicity of help-providers, therefore presenting as *a key delimiting resource*.

Collectivity work results in the constitution of boundaries between one achieved collectivity and another. In this study and where in conversations help-seeking and family problems were being considered, collectivity work resulted in routine achievement of the collectivities 'inside' and 'outside' the family/home⁶¹. This collectivity work facilitated the consideration of options, exclusion of potential sources of help and the selection of others. Collectivity work enabled the drawing of a boundary between one set and another. Participants drew on inter-subjective understandings of how collectivities work through practical reasoning and conventional understandings of the routine formulation inside/outside⁶², to work towards resolving the convergence problem of categorisation.

In extract 5:2 below, four women are discussing the vignette at the point where the researcher asks 'so do you think child-welfare agencies should be involved with this family?' Again, what is pervasive across this extract is that the debate between participants is organised around a consideration of category *collectivities*. The researcher deploys the collectivity 'child-welfare agencies' and participants introduce 'outsiders'. In this extract, practical reasoning *operates at the level of collectivity*. In introducing 'outsiders' participants are not required to list or detail

⁶¹ Whilst participants variously referred to 'home' and 'family', in the context of these conversations 'home' routinely invoked the device 'family' and 'home' was a frequent inference from 'family'.

⁶² In a later section in this chapter I discuss in some detail the binary inside/outside which features across the research materials with respect to the indexical properties of collectivity work. Inside/outside also acts as a 'standardised relational pair'- see chapter 4 for an explanation of standardised relational pairs (SRPs). In SRPs, use of one side of the pair renders programmatically relevant the other side.

the 'outsiders', rather, consideration operates at the boundary of the achieved collectivity 'outsiders' versus sources of help 'in the home'.

Extract 5:2

R: Ok, so do you think child-welfare agencies should be involved with this family? -

D: Debateable

C: Yeah, debateable

A: Debateable

B: It seems a bit early to say that yet

C: I think that - I think they need to try and work together first

A: I agree with that

D: I think em possibly, if you em - child-welfare//

A: It won't help the scenario - this situation, if outsiders came in at this stage. I mean, they were obviously very much in love and they may have wanted to commit themselves as a family, but it went wrong. And it only went wrong because - the obvious things that we can see about this family - support, talking and communication that you said (to C) can be dealt with in the home.

(Transcript FG12)

In chapter 3, I introduced the notion of '*presumptive representativeness*' (Sacks 1992, LC6 pp40- 41) stating that inference can operate on the basis of what is known about a group of individuals rather than knowledge of *an* individual. In extracts 5:1 and 5:2 above, clearly inference can work at the level of collectivity. Participants shared in an understanding of what situatedly, in the context of these particular conversations, constituted the 'inside' and the 'outside' without either collectivity having to be specified in terms of listing or detailing the category sets. Thus, in the course of practical reasoning, these participants were able to draw inferences on the basis of knowledge of a group and this was routinely socially sanctioned. Constituting collectivities and making inferences on the basis of collectivities presented as a feature of the routine and orderly conduct of practical reasoning. Given the principle of presumptive representativeness, participants drew comparisons and made selections without the need to make reference to individuals explicit. The following extract provides further substantiation of these claims:

Extract 5:3

C: Only real close family would find out, they'd be so worried about it getting out. If it got out people would start making a lot out of it. The truth gets lost in the lies doesn't it? - So- a lot of lies are spread and - and the truth is dissolved really isn't it? - You don't want people to know much about it, it's really difficult to keep it within – erm - even if you just tell one person, it can get out and then there's no coming back after that, (A: yeah, it's out), yeah.

(Transcript FG18)

In extract 5:3 participant C has selected 'real close family' as a source of help; she draws a boundary between 'real close family' and 'people'. She claims that 'people' are not a preferred source of support: 'you don't really want people to know much about it'. Central to her argument is an achieved boundary between 'real close family' and 'people'. This boundary is achieved, however, without specifying or making explicit which categories in this instance constitute the two collectivities; rather, her reasoning operates at the level of collectivity. *Who* 'people' are, is simply to be inferred by reference to whom they are *not* - 'real close family'.

Programmatic relevance of the MCD family in boundary work

The observations made above raise the question of how it is that participants routinely made relevant a boundary between 'inside and outside' the family. In understanding how this works it is important to consider the programmatic relevance of the family. From the transcripts, participants variously expressed reference to help

‘inside the family/family circle/home’⁶³ and help ‘outside the family/home’; questions about help-seeking routinely invoked the MCD family. In the focus group conversations, for example, participants frequently made *first* reference to a family member when asked where one of the fictitious characters in the vignette might seek help. Participants were able to make the selection of family members as sources of help without inquiring into the particulars of the case or the particulars of family relationships; such selections were routinely made and expressed as factive statements. Returning briefly to Sacks’s thesis (1966), he argued that the MCD family has a pervasive across the board relevance, such that one can properly orient *at all times* to the category family, irrespective of whether incumbency exists:

‘ In this culture at least that the collection of categories which comprise what members call ‘the family’ may properly be oriented to at all times without respect to whether incumbency exists. It is perfectly proper in this culture to inquire of another’s ‘family status’ to ask if one has children, to say of a married couple ‘they are childless’ and ‘everything’s alright with me but I don’t have a wife yet’. The device family therefore has a programmatic across-the-board relevance, such that non-incumbency, absences and the like may be proposed with respect to its categories’ (Sacks 1966, p44).

Thus as Sacks noted in relation to help-seeking, social actors can take for granted that family members can be considered. I noted in interviews, that participants who

⁶³ A number of references are made such as ‘home’ ‘within the family circle’ or simply ‘within’ which appear *in situ* to invoke the categories that constitute the family. However, on each and every occasion of invocation of those ‘inside’ the family, the categories that are assigned as incumbents of this collectivity is locally achieved. I discuss this further, later in this chapter.

felt they were unable to draw on their own family for support offered spontaneous accounts about this non-availability. Sacks writes that when accounting work orients to 'absence', that is, when absence of a category is noted or accounted for, then this is an indication of programmatic relevance:

'When, for whatever reasons, some membership categorisation device is made relevant (for example, is considered as a proper way to classify members, or is considered to be of import for consideration of some issue at hand etc.) then the categories of that device will often be accorded a pervasive and continual significance, such that one may properly focus on the fact that there are not incumbents of the various categories of the Device. Non-incumbency becomes a noticeable matter' (Sacks, 1966, p43).

In the next chapter I will consider in much more detail participants' co-production of a socially sanctioned sequence of help-seeking and the function of the MCD family in this 'sequencing' work. However, for the purposes of this chapter the point I make is that participants collected together categories 'inside' and 'outside' the home/family, or in contrast to the home/family, *as a consequence of, and attendant on, the programmatic relevance of the MCD family*. On the basis of the programmatic relevance of the MCD family, it is possible to conclude that in the context of conversations about help-seeking and personal family problems this device is axiomatic in decision-making. That is, the MCD 'family' and categories

that constitute this device are a *first*⁶⁴ *point of reference, first point of contrast or comparison* for the collection of other categories of help-providers.

That the MCD family was programmatically relevant and that this was intersubjectively understood, provided for and enabled participants to engage effectively in the interpretive work of the on-going discourse. In the following extract (5:4), whilst the participant fails to make explicit who 'we' are (line 5), my understanding of the programmatic relevance of the MCD family and hence the categories which constitute that MCD, enabled me, as a competent member of the culture, to make an 'educated guess'. I respond 'is that you and your wife?' and the participant's next utterance (line 8) confirms this understanding.

Extract 5:4

1. R: What about on the home front then? If a problem crops up at home – err - it could
 2. be a domestic problem?
 3. P: A domestic problem or - ?
 4. R: It could be a domestic problem or child with a health problem or financial problem
 5. P: Well, domestic problem, we sit down talk about it, compromise in whatever way,
 6. sort it out -
 7. R: And is that you and your wife or - ?
 8. P: Oh yeah, if we have any arguments we usually sit down and talk about it, find out
 9. what the problem is and compromise.
 10. R: If there was a problem that you and your wife couldn't sort out, say – erm - say
 11. you had some worry that was ongoing. Who would you go to then for advice?
 12. P: Maybe talk to the parents?
 13. R: So, family would be your first port of call?
 14. P: Oh yeah, they would definitely be the first port of call. I know there's other groups
 15. around, but I'd go to the family first and try to resolve it.
- (Transcript Int12)

⁶⁴ In the next chapter I develop these observations and examine participants' sequencing work.

From the research materials it was also possible to observe that when a family member was unavailable then this required some accounting work; note the following extract (5:5) in which the participant offers some lengthy discussion about why he cannot seek help from his own family. This is a spontaneous explanation but is expected, as it arises from the programmatic relevance of the MCD family in conversations about help-seeking and family problems.

Extract 5:5

R: So, you'd try and sort things yourself first?

P: Yeah we'd try and sort it out ourselves first. Erm - err- I think K would approach her parents and family first, before I would approach anybody - erm - because - I've only got like,- there's only like my mother - who I'm not like massively close to-that I can talk to about things like that. I - err - I always feel sort of - err- uncomfortable with things like that. But I think K would actually go to her family first, either her mum and dad or her aunty in Ytown. I'm not sure who I'd go to, to be honest-very difficult.- K's family first (R:yeah, yeah)- she's comfortable speaking to them about things like that, whereas I'm not comfortable speaking to my parents about things like that, so I leave it to her.

(Transcript Int 6)

In extract 5:5 the participant is responding to a question from the researcher about where he would seek help; he answers with a spontaneous account about the non-availability of family members, specifically his mother ('there's only like my mother'). He provides an account of why, despite the fact that he has a mother, he cannot go to her. He explains that he is 'not like massively close' to her. That **P** feels he needs to account for the non-availability of family members turns on the issue of his *need to explain absence* and the programmatic relevance of the categories that constitute the MCD family in this context.

The boundaries of the MCD 'family'

From the transcripts, the MCD⁶⁵ family was rendered a background expectancy or relevance in situated talk. However, detailed analysis of the materials revealed that participants, when referring to the family, referred to a boundary around the family such as 'within the family circle'. Participants made various reference to 'within the family home'/'circle' rather than simply referring to 'the family' *per se*. In addition, those who were considered 'inside the family' may have constituted categories routinely assigned family member status, but in addition, may also have comprised those situatedly *treated as* 'inside the family/circle/home', for example 'friends'. Those who were considered inside the family were always an occasioned collection and this occasioned collection could extend beyond the conventional categories of the MCD family and exclude certain family members.

Thus, a key observation is that participants demarcated a boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family. However, 'inside' did not simply or strictly comprise kinship members. Rather, the boundary was more flexible and accommodated an occasioned collection of individuals who were *treated as* 'inside the family' (note, for example, the everyday expression, 'she's like one of the family') and it is for this

⁶⁵ In Sacks's work he coins the notion of the MCD. In his work 'Search for Help' the MCD family is of some central relevance in the observations he makes about interactions between both callers and staff of an emergency help-line (psychiatric clinic). However, Sacks treats the boundaries of MCDs as finite in this piece of work. Whilst in his research materials the MCD family may have presented as a finite category set for practical purposes, in the research materials used for this thesis the boundaries of the MCD family were open-textured; that is who was considered 'inside' the family was a local, contextual achievement. This observation touches on comments that Hester and Eglin (1997) have made concerning the possibility of reading from Sacks's work, categories as determinate structures of the social world. Hester and Eglin write that: 'Categories are 'collected' with others in the course of their being used. In turn, this means that the 'collection' to which a category belongs (for this occasion) is constituted through its use in a particular context; it is part and parcel of its use in that way' (Hester and Eglin, 1997, p21). Jayyusi's (1984) reference to the open-textured-ness of categories and devices is useful for this thesis and of some central practical import. I take up the practical implications of this claim in the final chapter of this thesis.

reason that *a priori* formulations of 'family' cannot be assumed to be productive, of and in itself, the collectivity 'inside the family'. A small number of research participants, for example, made reference to a professional who had been known for a long time or was 'more of a friend' and would be treated as 'inside the family circle' for help-seeking purposes. This observation is of some considerable practical import and will be returned to later in this chapter (discussion). For current purposes, however, it is possible to conclude that two discernible *occasioned* collections of categories as collection 'I' (inside) and collection 'O' (outside) were routinely co-produced and made relevant in talk.

The MCD family is axiomatic in situated decision-making

Decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking', as in extract 5:1, appeared in many instances to be able to operate at the level of *making operational a boundary* between the achieved collections of 'I' and 'O'. Given that I shared in the same inter-subjective resources as the research participants, it is possible to see how I equally deployed my understanding of a socially sanctioned line of demarcation between collection 'I' and collection 'O' to direct the flow of conversation in focus group and interviews. Having established that any competent member knows that, in relation to questions about help, a boundary can be routinely formulated-as-relevant between 'inside' and 'outside' the family, one way of probing this further was to present a question in such a way as to render those on the 'inside' unavailable:

Extract 5:6

R: Imagine there's a problem that you can't go to your family with and you need to go to an outside agency, what would you be looking for in that outside agency - in order to feel safe to approach them?

P: Probably - err - discretion being vital.

(Transcript Int17)

In extract 5:6, I rule out the family ('you can't go to your family') and on this basis can direct the participant to consider collection 'O' ('you need to go outside'). The participant responds and answers this question, consenting to and following my boundary work. Similarly in extract 5:7 below, I direct the flow of conversation towards the topic of 'outside' help by assisting the participant in 'imagining' a problem which I consider (constitute) may be relevant for 'outside help':

Extract 5:7

1. **R:** OK - can you imagine ever using social work services?
2. **P:** Err - yeah - err - if the situation arose - err - two answers to that. Err - at the moment I
3. can't imagine why we would need to. So - that's just because I've not lived a life like the
4. people you have visited, sort of thing. It's something that I am not familiar with on a
5. personal basis. Err, so, I can't kind of imagine it, but if the situation, if the situation did sort
6. of evolve where we did need it at all, then I could imagine using - err?
7. **R:** Say, for example, that N was descending into depression, hitting the bottle. [**P:** Yeah,
8. yeah in that sort of situation, yeah]. Say you tried to manage it, it's unlikely to happen
9. [**P:** Highly, highly unlikely laughing], but could you see any point going outside the family
10. to try to get help?
11. **P:** I would be more likely to go outside of the family for that, than inside, intuitively. Em-
12. err - where would I go? (**R:** yeah) - It would depend on the nature and impact of the problem,
13. so if she wasn't harming anybody else - err - so - err - if she was harming herself, I would
14. probably get some advice on how to persuade her to go to AA or something like that. Erm -
15. whereas if obviously, if she was harming the children or possibly abusing herself - erm, I'd
16. just pick a number out of yellow pages or ring social services and describe the problem.

(Transcript Int7)

In extract 5:7, I push the participant to consider ‘going outside the family to try to get help’ (line 9). The participant responds to, and makes use of this achieved dichotomy, thus displaying his inter-subjective understanding of its relevance. He confirms that given the nature of the problem presented, he would be more likely to ‘go outside of the family for that than inside’ (line 11). In contemplating going ‘outside’, he states he will pick up the yellow pages or ring social services. Both researcher and participants share in and co-constitute a boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and thus, co-constitute this boundary as relevant to questions about help-seeking⁶⁶. These observations suggest that the MCD family is interactionally pivotal, not in the sense of enduring or fixed in talk, but in the sense of enabling talk about help-seeking to ‘tip’ in different directions; hence, participants’ routine achievement of the collectivities ‘extended family’, ‘immediate family’ or ‘family circle’ versus those ‘outside’.

Extract 5:8

B: I think that Jenny's got to go and do something - err- to ask for help – err - whether it's from her sister or – erm - her sister might advise her, mightn't she?

R: What do you think her preference would be here? - Do you think it would be to keep it within the family?

D: Yeah=

B: =yeah, as much as she could, keep it quiet. - It's personal isn't it?

A: She's probably a little embarrassed about it, especially if the teacher's already got involved. She'll want to keep it in a close-knit community like the family and not extend it out, so that it gets too much - and then it'll get blown out of proportion.

R: She thinks it'll get blown out of proportion? Mm - By?

A: If social services or anybody that's an onlooker, rather than the family that's actually seen it happen-

R: So - is there something about it, it feels safer to keep it in the family?

D: Yeah, definitely.

(Transcript FG5)

⁶⁶ At this stage of data collection there had been no analysis of data or consideration of MCA by myself. I have therefore treated my conversational turns as equivalent to those of other participants.

Extract 5:8 provides a further illustration of the pivotal function of the MCD family and that participants in decision-making routinely made use of this device. In extract 5:8 a boundary is drawn between 'the family' and 'the outside'. In this extract participants refer to keeping the problem in/extending it out. 'Outsiders' are variously expressed as the teacher, social services or 'anybody that's an onlooker' and these are juxtaposed with 'the family'.

Collections 'I' and 'O': further observations on the parameters of open texture

I stated in chapter 1 of this thesis that the help-seeking literature and indeed recent developments in 'family friendly' initiatives are premised on an assumption of a dichotomy between informal and formal support. This relevance is assumed *a priori* and condenses help-seeking relevancies along a particular dimension to do with professional versus non-professional help. In this study, whilst participants routinely achieved a boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family, the relationships constituted between sets of categories was 'messier' than suggested by the informal/formal divide, which is based on a determinate mapping of category concepts *a priori* onto category collectivities. From observation of my materials, 'inside' and 'outside' cannot be condensed into finite sets of category concepts or defined by any single dimension such as professional/non-professional or family/non-family. Whilst participants routinely demarcated a boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family, it is not possible to say that all professionals were considered 'outside' and all family members were considered 'inside'. What is categorised as 'inside' was always an occasioned matter and thus *situated demarcation of 'insiders' allowed 'identification' of the outsiders* and vice versa. Situated 'I' is always to be discerned

from situated 'O'. The standardised relational pair (SRP) inside/outside (I/O) presented as a routine formulation when participants were faced with decisions about sources of help, but collectivity work cannot simply be *condensed* along the dimension I/O in all instances. Collectivity work is always tied to practical purposes when considering questions about help-seeking. In delineating collection 'I' and 'O' it is important to underline that my intention is not to draw up or generate a finite list of those deemed to be 'I's or 'O's. Whilst one might routinely consider that 'insiders' are 'family and friends', and 'outsiders' are 'professionals and strangers' there is a complexity which renders such mapping and condensing work problematic. A further consideration of the categories 'friend' and 'stranger' serves to illustrate this point and the importance of considering 'I' and 'O' as occasioned and open-textured.

Commencing with the category 'friend', one of the problems for the cognitive anthropologists or constructivists in dealing with the category concept 'friend' is that the category 'friend' is, as Jayussi writes, an *achieved* category; that is, anyone can potentially gain category incumbency. The complication for those who pursue categorical maps of the social world is that incumbency of this category is not fixed; 'the professional' can become a friend, (whilst still being assigned to the category 'professional' for other practical purposes). Thus, one might envisage a scenario in which a relationship is struck up between a health visitor and a mother as a consequence of the health visitor frequenting the mother's home and offering advice, support and so forth. The mother may come to view the health visitor as her 'friend' but for other practical purposes (for example, in a telephone call to the clinic) may refer to the woman as her health visitor. So we get in this instance a kind

of *dual incumbency* (as a consequence of the premise that ascription of incumbency is always generated/required for particular practical purposes) and this complicates the constructivist enterprise. Note the following example:

Extract 5:9:

1. C: My next-door neighbour's a police man. I don't think I would go personally to the
 2. police, but I would go to someone like that, do you know what I mean? He's a
 3. policeman and I'd probably go there because he's also a friend. But I would not go
 4. personally to – you wouldn't walk into a police station, you wouldn't go to social
 5. services - but if someone was a friend - then that's different//
 6. B: Or she'd go to her neighbour//
 7. D: You'd go to your neighbour or your friend//
 8. E: Your neighbour? But you would never actually go specifically and approach them,
 9. I wouldn't any way, I don't know about anyone else. - I would never actually go and
 10. physically approach them//
 11. A: It depends on how well you know the people as well though.- Because you
 12. wouldn't like - I've come down, I've come down here, or I'd have gone to Clare or
 13. Katie. But I wouldn't have gone to anybody else about anything, because you don't
 14. know what other people are going to be like
 15. C: I wouldn't.
 16. F: I'm a talker. I would have gone mental if I hadn't have talked to anybody that
 17. would listen//
 18. A: Yeah, but if you went to her over there, or her there, and say something - they may
 19. take it upon themselves to take it to social services and then say right, OK, then "I've
 20. had this woman on my doorstep crying because her boyfriend's beating her kids up"//
 21. C: That's what I mean; would you have gone to somebody? (E: Who you don't really
 22. trust?) No//
 23. A: Or somebody official like (E: social services)?
 24. B: I would have turned to my neighbours=
 25. C: =anybody like neighbours friends//
 26. B: Somebody close by that would talk to you.
- (Transcript FG3)

In extract 5:9, clearly there are a number of candidates suggested as appropriate sources of support. Looking at how these selections are qualified, however, the following observations can be made. First, whilst neighbours are considered sources of support, this is not *all* neighbours. At lines 11-13, A differentiates between neighbours who are just 'anybody' and by implication neighbours who are 'somebody' who can be approached for help: 'it depends on how well you know the people' (line 11) and 'I've, I've come down here, or I'd have gone to Clare or Katie,

but I wouldn't have gone to anybody else about anything' (lines 12-13). Second, one and the same individual can be ascribed as an incumbent of the category 'policeman' but also, in a different context (here for help-seeking purposes), can be categorised as 'friend' (lines 1-3). Both observations illustrate the problems of specifying in a finite sense collection 'I' and collection 'O'.

The following example serves as a further illustration of the problems of the constructivist enterprise which starts with static boundaries (informal/formal) and attempt to use category concepts as definitive. In extract 5:10 a mother is relating her experiences of domestic violence in an interview; she describes the importance of time spent in a women's refuge which offered her a place of security and safety. She is talking about her relationship with Margaret, a refuge manager and a key figure in her account. The sense of the refuge as 'ace' is in part accomplished in and through her depiction of her relationship with this refuge manager; across the exchange this refuge manager is at once a refuge worker, 'friend' and later in her account, 'godmother' to her children.

Extract 5:10

P: A couple of months later I found out I was pregnant - It was Margaret she said to me "Are you sure you are not pregnant?" I said "no". "Now are you sure now?" She brought the kit in for me, she was lovely. We really hit it off as friends and it turned out I was pregnant with his son.

R: So was that David (interviewee's son)?

P: Yes, David. He was an absolute darling, up till now. He is a pain in the backside now (laughing). Err- so I did get in touch with him when he got cleared - to tell him he had a son. - But he didn't want anything to do with me. So then I got to bring the three of them up myself in Z refuge.

R: How long were you in the refuge?

P: For two years and it was the best two years of my life to be quite honest, cos Margaret became Steven's godmother. She actually ran the refuge and then I got a part-time job there and it was ace. I just liked working there; I still want to be a counsellor.

(Transcript BPINT 7)

If we take the category 'stranger', again it is possible to anticipate the problems this category poses for those who pursue determinate structures of the social world. A family member for example can become a stranger. It is perfectly reasonable to say, "I haven't seen my mother for years, I wouldn't know what to say to her, she's a stranger to me". Thus whilst one can ascertain the programmatic relevance of the MCD family and observe the routine formulation of I/O in conversations about help-seeking, who or which category concepts are considered 'inside' the family depends on and results from a series of contextual and interactional relevancies.

Discussion

There are a number of significant points that can be drawn from the observations made above. First, in these situated conversations, when considering help with family problems there were a number of category contenders considered for help which presented participants in this study with the convergence problem of categorisation. However, whilst there were a number of contenders for help, the categories that were routinely considered to constitute the device 'family' had some special relevance - they were programmatically relevant such that absence became a noticeable (accountable) matter. On the basis of the programmatic relevance of the family, situated decision-making appeared axiomatic around this device, resulting in the routine achievement of the collectivities 'inside' and 'outside' the family. In observing this boundary work, this is not to suggest that this was the only boundary drawn in talk, but rather to suggest that the categories that constituted the family were routinely a point of contrast, or comparison, a referent in decision-making.

In addition, for the purpose of this thesis it is important to highlight that participants' collectivity work frequently rendered the boundary around the family as flexible in terms of category membership, via use of expressions such as 'family circle' and so forth. It is important to consider collection 'I' as comprising not just of selected family members but an occasioned collection of selected individuals treated as 'inside the family' for practical purposes. This is a significant point and extends Sacks's conceptualisation of the centrality of the MCD 'family'. Whilst it is not possible to generalise from the data discussed in this study to help-seeking behaviour, observing that 'a professional' can gain incumbency of the collection 'insiders' prompts thinking away from simplistic dichotomies such as the informal/formal dichotomy (as manifest in prior studies of help-seeking) and suggests that help-seeking decisions may not simply be a matter of choosing between professional versus non-professional help. Housley (2003) has described categories as situated phenomena that are made recognisable by the methodical procedures of members' categorisation work.

To take issue with the use of received collectivities such as 'informal/formal' is not to dispute the relevance of such devices in practical reasoning; indeed, one might intuitively expect that literature or conversations on help-seeking be replete with such categorical devices. Rather, generalist depictions, typified by *a priori* formulations such as 'informal/formal' and 'professional/non-professional' (or equally 'insider/outsider') risk oversimplifying social actors' knowledge of and negotiation of the social world.

In this chapter and in the chapters that follow I suggest that part of the problem for those who attempt to attract help-seekers to child-welfare services is that there is little detailed empirical analysis of the relevancies which drive the help-seekers' demarcation work in choosing between sources of help. Rather, use of formulations such as the informal/formal divide organise thinking about help-seeking in advance of the study of help-seeking. In contrast, this analysis has commenced with the situated 'boundary work' of social actors in situations of practical reasoning. In focusing on how social actors made selections between one category of help-provider over another in situated talk, it has been possible to explore what other boundaries (i.e. collectivities) are achieved in talk and this has implications for future research on help-seeking.

The reconsidered model of MCA highlights the *indexical* properties of categories and categorisation work. I posit that whilst social actors may frequently mark a distinction between family and professionals, this is not always the case and to dismiss instances where an individual selects a professional as a preferred source of support as 'deviant cases' or anomalies, is to miss something very important and of practical import; namely that doing 'boundary work' for each and every occasion of consideration of categories of help, is an important aspect of decision-making. I suggest that family-friendly services might, as an alternative, acknowledge the centrality of boundary work and aim to better understand how this boundary work is socially organised in relation to help-seeking behaviour. I explore this further in the conclusion in discussing avenues for further research.

Chapter 6

Help-seeking preferences: 'Sequencing work' in situated talk

Introduction

In the previous chapter I identified that 'boundary work' was central to situated decision-making. Participants routinely achieved a boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family, via the co-production of collectivities. In this chapter I will extend this analysis, commencing with the premise that collectivity and boundary work are not just about 'economy'; a short-cut way of referring to a group of individuals, but are also demarcative. In this chapter I focus on 'sequencing work' as an accountable property of decision-making and illustrate how 'sequencing work' serves to demarcate preferred categories of help from those that are not preferred. Where a problem is situatedly formulated as a family problem that impacts on the care of children, collection 'I' is programmatically relevant for help 'in the first instance'. For participants, decision-making is a practical-moral activity; with social actors demarcating whom should be considered 'in the first instance' and who is 'a last resort'.

In this chapter I make four key claims:

- The category 'Self' is routinely constituted a first resource; one's own resources should routinely be considered first, before one seeks help.

- If a decision to seek help has been made, it is accountable to consider which resources should be consulted first, with those ‘inside’ a first port of call.
- Sequencing work is organised around ‘first-position’ category pairs and ‘last-position’ category pairs. Participants either use, or make reference to prior knowledge of help-seeking encounters in making decisions about who is a candidate for a first-position pair.
- There is an exclusivity to collection ‘I’; availability of those ‘inside’ serves to rule out those on the ‘outside’. Thus, ‘no-one to turn to’ frequently presents as a stimulus to seeking help from ‘outside’.

‘Sequencing work’ in focus group and interview talk: ‘Self’ as a first resource

Participants in both interview and focus groups were asked to consider help-seeking and family problems that impact on the care of children. From detailed analysis of transcripts, a key observation is that seeking help for personal family problems was routinely constituted as *not* automatic; participants routinely made relevant ‘sorting it yourself’ or at least considering one’s own resources, prior to *seeking* help. ‘Self’ was constituted as a first resource and ‘*help*’ was only to be considered after one has exhausted one’s own resources.

Extract 6:1

R: So what does it mean to you to ask for help?

P: What does it mean to me to ask for help - err- err- I don’t really ask for help

R: You don’t ask for help?

P: No, I don’t. (R: No?) It’s very- I like to do things myself, even though I struggle, I tend to, to find it easier just to do it myself rather than go and ask people. - Because I don’t like people to think that I’m not coping, do you see what I mean? (R: Yes I see what you mean.) - Even though I’ve been on anti-depressants and everything, through having to cope on my own – err - I’d rather just cope on my own, try and deal with it, myself- err - . It’s more of an embarrassment thing- I think -. I don’t want people to think I can’t cope, but if I do I will just go to my friends and talk to somebody on the phone. At least I feel a little bit better when I’ve spoke to somebody.

(Transcript Int22)

In extract 6:1, the participant responds to my opening question by marking a distinction between asking for help and doing things for herself. P states, 'I don't really ask for help'; she explains that although she 'struggles', she would rather 'do it' herself than 'go and ask people' for help. For this participant, she constitutes *asking* for help as an activity that implies 'not coping'. Not coping carries negative connotations; she does not want people to consider her as not coping. This would draw attention to her in a way that would *embarrass* her. Thus, coping is presented as 'business as usual', a first position, *seeking* help is 'not coping'. In this interview the participant states that she has 'been on anti-depressants', but does not frame this for the interviewer as an instance of help-seeking. For many participants, actively *asking* or looking for help was routinely constituted as negatively morally implicative and only to be considered after exhausting one's own resources. A similar pattern in talk is discernible in extract 6:2 below.

Extract 6:2

R: How do you think women feel asking for help?

B: A failure=

A: =failure- it's a sign of weakness

B: Absolutely

A: Our Mam said - err - I had a bad night with these last night - (pointing to her children) and she said maybe if I had them for a couple of nights? And I said no, I'm not doing that, people will think I can't cope - and I think - well she's got enough on with work, you know - .

(Transcript FG1)

In extract 6:2 participant A describes asking for help as a 'failure' and B supports her, adding a contiguous utterance 'failure - it's a sign of weakness'. Participant A states that even when her mother offers help with the care of her children, she does not want to accept it, because this would imply not coping; again she does not want people to think she cannot cope 'I'm not doing that, people will think I can't cope'.

In this extract, although the participant states that she might want help, she claims that it is better to maintain appearances of coping. Across data-sets participants routinely rendered *seeking* help as qualitatively different from sorting it oneself. 'Help' is given by another, or asked for from another only *after* 'self' is exhausted as a resource.

Extract 6:3

R: So, is she going to seek help? - I mean, do you think Jenny is going to go for help from somebody - somewhere?

A: I think her mum=

C: =her mum or her sisters//

B: But before she does that she needs to face up to the fact that she perhaps does need help

C: This might be something that she keeps very much to herself initially, and in time things will sort themselves out - I don't think that she will rush off immediately to see someone -

B: Yes - err - maybe she'll have a look at it herself first -. She's got an awful lot of stuff going on...

(Transcript FG6)

In extract 6:3 above, seeking help for personal family problems again is presented as non-routine. Participants talk of 'sorting it yourself' or at least considering one's own resources, prior to *seeking* help. In this extract seeking 'help' is not something to be rushed into; **C** states of the fictitious character in the vignette, 'this might be something that she keeps very much to herself initially' and 'I don't think she will rush off immediately to see someone'. Seeking help is thus constituted as not an 'immediate' response; rather, it is something that might be considered after 'initially' attempting to sort difficulties oneself.

Extract 6:4

R: What does it mean to ask for help?

P: - To solve a problem - to try to resolve - err -. I would generally- probably - err only ask for help on a - err -, I suppose I have never been that desperate, but it's generally been on a - technical or lack of information or a not knowing what to do type scenario. - Err - so I see it as sort of, - and again this might be a male sort of thing - split sort of thing - but I see it as a way of solving a problem. There's a problem here, I know what the problem is, I don't know what the solution is. So I need to ask for somebody's help, somebody's advice - so that they can help me solve the problem.

(Transcript Int8)

In extract 6:4 above, for participant P, seeking help implies desperation. He seeks help when there is a problem and *he* hasn't the solution, when he *needs* to ask for help. He is specific about the help he has asked for 'only, on a technical or lack of information type scenario'¹. From the research materials, it is possible to observe that participants marked a stage prior to seeking help for personal family problems. Deciding to seek help only occurred after consideration of one's own resources. Thus, seeking help was routinely constituted (at the outset) as a default position, often negatively morally implicative and implying failure of one's own resources².

Extract 6:5

R: So I am just going to ask you some general questions about help-seeking, and you answer the questions in every way you will - so if I said to you what does it mean to you to ask for help, what would you say?

P: -Embarrassment (laughing)

R: Embarrassment? (laughing)

P: - Err - in the first instance.

R: And what would that embarrassment be about?

P: Well, probably that you'd got to the stage where you need - you can't sort it out for yourself and you, you know - err - sort of not manly enough - you know, it's a manly thing for me.

(Transcript Int10)

In the interview extract above the male participant attributes his embarrassment about seeking help as a 'manly thing'. In this extract P states that seeking help means that you have got to the stage 'where you can't sort it out for yourself.'

¹The reader may be interested in whether gender impacts on help-seeking and this is certainly one potential avenue of enquiry. In this study, however, gender has not been used as an *a priori* analytic category, only in so far as it was noted that *all* participants made clear that seeking help was frequently difficult where problems to do with family and the care of children were made relevant. The male in this extract explains his difficulty as possibly 'a male sort of thing'. Whilst I acknowledge that participants might introduce explanations to do with gender into their accounts, this is different from inferring that gender is an organising property of situated decision-making.

² I take this up in much more detail in chapter 8.

Again P's reference to 'stages', displays his 'sequencing' work and that this sequencing work is normatively organised around self as a first resource 'you'd got to the stage where you need, you can't sort it out for yourself'.

From this series of observations, it is possible to claim that it is both normative and routine to constitute seeking help with family problems which impact on the care of children as a 'default position' (from the outset). Seeking help is a point *after* use of self as a first resource. Participants sequencing work constitutes 'coping' as normative and a first (moral) choice when faced with family problems; in contrast, 'not coping' is a routine inference from *seeking* help, as is 'weakness', 'being desperate' and 'a failure'. Seeking help can routinely imply that a stage has been reached where help is *needed* and this is negatively morally implicative. Coping is constituted as normative; to cope is to avoid the embarrassment of being seen to fail in this way. Sacks (1984) noted that departures from what is 'ordinary' have 'unknown costs' for the social actor. He concludes that 'almost everybody's business' is to be ordinary. In this context, the difficulties that participants co-produce indicate that a) *seeking* help with problems to do with family that impact on the care of children³ can be routinely considered not an 'ordinary' activity and b) 'coping' is routinely an inference of the ordinary activity of 'struggling on'/using self as a first resource. Thus, participants sequencing work presents as constitutive of a socially sanctioned and moral order, invoked reflexively, in relation to the topic 'help-seeking'.

³ Whilst context is always occasioned, these conversations have taken place in research encounters introduced as to do with family and child-welfare. In chapter 9, I illustrate that help invokes, reflexively, 'problems'. Thus, the concerns that participants display in these extracts may be generic, but it is not possible to make that claim from this data.

Seeking help with personal family problems: Asking for help ‘in the first instance’

‘Sequencing work’ as socially sanctioned

For participants, deciding to seek ‘help’ was routinely constituted as difficult. However, where participants made a decision that help with family problems was needed (namely that another person or source needed to get involved) participants further co-constituted a socially sanctioned order to help-seeking. For participants it was relevant to consider those callable for help in a *sequence*. In the following extract participants’ decision-making displays co-orientation to normative and inter-subjectively understandings about who (which category) should be considered for help ‘in the first instance’.

Extract: 6:6

R: Can I just move you down to the second question - if Jenny’s going to get help, who do you think she would turn to for help?

C: In the first instance?

R: In the first instance

C: Her mother=

A: =mother or sisters

R: Mother or sisters?

C: Because there’s no dialogue at home, if she couldn’t have that dialogue at home- in the first instance, it will be her mother rather than her sisters or a close friend even.

(Transcript FG15)

In extract 6:6, I ask participants where Jenny (the fictitious character in the vignette) might *seek* help and my question is met with a further question from C : ‘in the first instance?’ *Without* knowledge of the point in this sequence to which I refer, the participant is unable to answer the question. When I confirm for C, ‘in the first instance’, both C and A are then able to offer the categories ‘mother’ and ‘sisters’-

they co-produce a response with A confirming C's category selection. The response from C- 'in the first instance?' takes the analyst into the resources which C is drawing on in order to choose between a range of collections of help-providers. For participants there is a socially sanctioned and situatedly *agreed order* to seeking help; selecting, invoking, making relevant one category of help-provider over another, requires consideration of a preferred sequence. An accountable property of this sequencing work is to consider possible categories for help 'in the first instance'.

Extract 6:7

R: Where do you think Jenny will seek help?

B: Family first of all I would say=

D: definitely (A: yeah) her mum=

A: =within the family circle=

C: =her mum, her sisters, she would talk to them first.

(Transcript FG16)

In extract 6:7 **B** connects her selection of the MCD family to the statement 'first of all'. Again in this extract, **B's** response indicates that she is deploying and making use of her understanding that 'sequencing work' is a key interactional resource in this instance. The utterance from **D** which follows, and the sequential contributions from **A** and **C**, indicate that the chosen interactional resource (sequencing work) is a resource shared by co-conversationists. **C** confirms **B's** choice of category selection, 'her mum, her sisters', and qualifies her category selection with 'she would talk to them *first*'.

Extract 6:8.

R: Say, for example, just to give you a problem, - say, for example, - that your wife started drinking. I have selected that because from my work with the Muslim community - because that makes me realise that is a no no, (P:Definite no no). And I think for a woman to start drinking as well (P: Yeah, yeah). - But let's say unexpectedly you have another child and your wife becomes depressed and

she's started drinking in the afternoon – regularly - and you find this out. She hasn't told you but you find out - and you have talked to her and she says she can't give it up?

P: My first port of call would be to someone of her family, i.e. her sister which she is very close to. Anyway, so I'd go to someone, in that aspect of her side of the relationship and if that worked then fine and if not, then I'd seriously consider taking her into counselling to try and help her.

(Transcript Int13)

In the interview extract 6:8, note P's response to myself (R). I ask P where he would seek help in relation to a hypothetical scenario which centres on his wife and a drink problem. P introduces the notion of an order to help-seeking, commencing his response with the phrase '*my first port of call*'. Note that the rest of this response from P is organised as a set of contingencies which constitute *in situ* a sequence of help-seeking. One source of help ('someone of her family'⁴) must be considered *first* and *if* that doesn't work, then an alternative form of help is considered. Thus P's selections are *sequenced* and movement between those selected is contingent on non-availability or failure of those initially selected to provide help.

From the transcripts, it is possible to see category selection, expressed in the form of a set of contingencies, with contingencies constituting a preferred sequence to help-seeking.

⁴ In the previous chapter I stated that participants when demarcating collection 'I' co-produced an *occasioned* collection. That is participants grouped together and co-produced 'I', but 'I' always arose from situated relevancies. In extract 6:8 whilst sequencing work is central, the participant does not make general reference to the category collectivity 'family' rather he is specific using the pronoun 'her' (her family). Sequencing work is a key accountable property of decision-making but the collections achieved are always occasioned. I have asked specifically about problems that impact on the care of children and when I prompted participants using this context, then collection 'I' presented as programmatically relevant. Towards the end of this chapter I discuss sequencing specifics and begin to outline the reflexive relationship between the situatedly formulated 'problem' and the source of help. In chapter 9, I focus in detail on this relationship.

Sequence display: 'Insiders' (those within the family circle) a first port of call

Building on insights from the last chapter, those *situatedly* demarcated as 'insiders' were routinely rendered a '*first port of call*' in situated decision-making. 'Insiders' routinely categories from the MCD 'family' were clearly/recognisably to be turned to in the first instance. In the following interview extract, I use this knowledge as a resource in directing the flow of conversation:

Extract 6:9

R: Imagine there's a problem that you can't go to your family with and you need to go to an outside agency, what would you be looking for in that outside agency - in order to feel safe to approach them?

P: Probably – err - discretion being vital.

(Transcript Int17)

In the previous chapter, in discussing the extract above, I stated that I deployed my understanding of the normative function of collectivities (inside/outside) in talk to push the candidate to talk on the topic of 'outside agencies'. Note also that my question is organised around an understanding of a preferred order to help-seeking, this understanding renders accountable the proposition I make in this extract 'you can't go to your family...you need to go to an outside agency'. I rule out the 'family'⁵ (as the first port of call) in order to push the participant to talk on the topic of outside help. One might expect that if I were to reverse the order in which I presented these categories, such an utterance would be routinely encountered as curious by the participant and the participant would probably seek clarification. In extract 6:10 below, it is possible to observe the complex nesting of inferential work, which arises from an inter-subjective understanding that a) sequencing work is an

⁵ Situated 'I'.

accountable feature of situated decision-making and b) that collection 'I' is socially sanctioned for help as a first port of call.

Extract 6:10

1. **R:** OK - can you imagine ever using any helping agencies
2. **P:** Helping agencies?
3. **R:** You know family support services or social work services?
4. **P:** - Err – well we've been offered that before, but we've never really needed it, you know, I
5. mean some people might look at us and look down their noses at us, you know - you can't
6. keep a clean house or whatever, but no, there's been nothing, there's been nothing we can't
7. sort ourselves
8. **R:** Well what about with the school issue?
9. **P:** Well we've been offered help with that, but again, like I said, it's not like we need that
10. kind of help because you know she's 15 and she doesn't want to go to school, so when we
11. moved here, well I couldn't see the point of getting her into a school because she's not
12. going to get anything out of it, and to be quite honest after all the battles I've had with her, I
13. don't need anyone to come along and tell me that - (laughing). You know tell me to get her
14. to school, or the reasons why she won't go to school, I mean I've worked that one out for
15. myself! I know now we have to see the Education Social Worker, but I can tell you, she's
16. not going to do any better than I've done with her
17. **R:** It seems that for you helping agencies - you don't really feel you need them?
18. **P:** Well if something was to happen to me, then that would be different. I mean me and her,
19. we've been like sisters you know and if I wasn't around for her, then yeah, maybe the social
20. would have to step in. I'm not sure she could turn to her Dad, what with all that's happened.

(Transcript BP Int 20)

Extract 6:10 is taken from an interview with a mother who has resisted social work and educational intervention with her family. At the time of the interview the family had recently moved into Authority X and the child had been identified as not attending school. Despite the concerns that professionals in Authority X had expressed to the family, in this interview extract the mother clearly positions herself as properly responsible and first in line to help her daughter in relation to her non-attendance at school (lines 6 -7 and lines 12-16). The mother states: 'I don't' need anyone to come along and tell me that... I've worked that out for myself'. It is only if she were to become unavailable to her daughter 'if something were to happen to

me (line 18) (and she questions the father's availability) that 'the social' would have to step in (lines 19-20).

From the transcripts, the categories that constitute the MCD family or those designated 'inside the family circle' presented as not just programmatically relevant (chapter 5), but programmatically relevant for help 'in the first instance'. This is a strong claim and proponents of the reconsidered or occasioned model of MCA have questioned Sacks's statements of programmatic relevance⁶. I will therefore further substantiate and explicate this claim, as it has some central relevance in this thesis.

I have demonstrated that stating members would turn to their 'mother' or 'friend or 'social worker' as the first port of call is an occasioned matter, resulting from the relevancies of context and interactional possibilities of situated talk. However, it is possible to observe that no matter whether a social actor chooses his or her mother or social worker as a first source of help, it is an accountable feature of decision-making to enquire into the whereabouts of close family members. As stated in chapter 5, an understanding of the programmatic relevance of the MCD family or any other device is evident from participant orientation to or explanation of *absence* of incumbency. Thus, it is possible to substantiate claims of programmatic

⁶ Eglin and Hester (1992) have questioned Sacks's statements of programmatic relevance, indicating that there is a potential ambiguity arising from such statements, which means that such statements can be read as indicative of a cognate or constructivist perspective on the social world. There is certainly some difficulty in at once holding central the indexicality of categorisation work and at the same time making claims of programmatic relevance. However as I have illustrated from analysis of extracts in this chapter, categories that can be routinely constituted as incumbents of the MCD family function are oriented to in decision-making, and absence is a noticeable matter. To make claims of programmatic relevance in situated talk does not equate, however, with claiming that all social actors will always state, for example, that their 'mother' is the first port of call. That the noticing of absence of family members is displayed as an accountable matter in the selected extracts does allow the conclusion to be drawn that, unlike other MCDs such as 'child-welfare', the MCD family has some special relevance in decision-making in terms of consideration of a first port of call.

relevance by offering empirical examples of this organisation of talk. As Sacks writes, 'the notice of non-incumbency is not a straightforward matter' and he offers the following example:

'For example, that A may say of B "you don't have a wife?" might be something to which B could properly respond, "No, but I don't have a houseboy or a lover or a lot of money ...". How is it that not having a wife as against say not having a chauffeur becomes properly noticeable?' (Sacks, 1966, p43).

In this study, that social actors *initially* and routinely remarked on the absence of family members or those considered 'within the family circle', illustrates the programmatic relevance of the categories that constitute the device family as a first port of call.

Extract 6:11

R: So, you'd try and sort things yourself first?

P: Yeah, we'd try and sort it out ourselves first. Erm - err - I think K would approach her parents and family first, before I would approach anybody - erm - because - I've only got like - there's only like my mother- who I'm not like massively close to that I can talk to about things like that. I - err - I always feel sort of - err - uncomfortable with *things* like that. But I think K would actually go to her family first, either her mum and dad or her aunty in townY. I'm not sure who I'd go to be honest - very difficult.- K's family first (R:Yeah, yeah). She's comfortable speaking to them about things like that, whereas I'm not comfortable speaking to my parents about things like that, so I leave it to her.

(Transcript Int6)

In response to my question, P states that he would 'try to sort it out' with his wife first (self as a first resource), but it would be K who would approach her family *first* (family as a first port of call). He then proceeds to offer an account concerning the

non-availability of other family members. That the participant *initially* makes relevant and considers his mother, indicates that he understands that having a mother makes programmatic that he should turn to her for help 'in the first instance'. It is the programmatic relevance of his mother for not just help, but help in the first instance which provides for sense of and necessitates his account. In addition, when he is asked to consider his help seeking options he responds, 'I'm not sure ...very difficult'. His difficulty is accounted for in his following utterance: 'I'm not comfortable speaking to my parents about things like that. Again, that one's own family is programmatically relevant for help, provides for his difficulty.

Extract 6:12

B: Who do you think Jenny would turn to help for?

D: Her mum//

B: Jenny is the mother//

D: NO, Jenny would speak to her mother

B: Her mum, within the family unit?

D: Yeah, because her mum has been quite helpful,

A: There's no mention of grandmas, granddads?//

B: There is=

D: =there is, Jenny's mother is a widow who lives nearby (reading from the vignette).

(Transcript FG9)

In extract 6:12, again A's statement 'there's no mention of grandmas or granddads,' turns on the programmatic relevance of the family for help in the first instance. A's observation that 'there's no mention of grandmas, granddads' makes inter-subjective sense because grandmas and granddads are routinely considered for help in the first instance (if the device family is relevant, then so are all the categories that can be routinely considered constitutive of that device). In contrast, if A had stated 'there's no mention of the social worker' one might imagine that such a statement would be rendered curious, unless participants had made clear a social worker was involved with this family. These findings concur with findings from

Sacks (1966) who claimed that the suicidal person's problem of no-one to turn to resulted from the normative organisation of obligations between family members, who could be considered proper to turn to for help.

In extract 6:13 below, the interview participant talks of her difficulty in seeking help ('I find it quite hard because I haven't got any family around' (lines 2-3). In the context of this conversation we see that she demarcates family and friends as preferred sources of help, she makes first reference to her family who are 'not around'. Her difficulty arises because those that are programmatically and normatively expected to provide help in the first instance, are in one way or another not callable for help. In this instance she also makes reference to friends; she understands that friends are also normatively considered for help in the first instance and she explains that they all 'have a lot on' (line 5)

Extract 6:13

1. R: So the first question is, what does it mean to you to ask for help?
2. P: Depends on what you are like as a person. I tend to find it quite hard because I haven't
3. got any family around. I've got used to doing things on my own and you tend to think –
4. I'll just manage really. Err - so I'm not very good at asking for help really, and all the
5. friends in this area- they've all got little kids, they've all got a lot on. It's not fair to
6. expect them – so – em - it's quite a difficult thing to do sometimes
7. R: Do you think that's also a wider feeling about help-seeking or do you think that's
8. personal to you?
9. P: Err - I'm not sure really but I think it's probably - a general thing isn't it? To
10. experience that-
11. R: So if you were sort of struggling at all, who might you ask for help? Say you were
12. really ill and your husband was at work and you just couldn't get out of bed -.
13. P: I would ring one of my friends to start with- if I felt it was just going to be a one day
14. thing and if I thought it was going to be a longer thing I would ring my family and say
15. could they come down (from Scotland) - for a couple of days or whatever
16. R: And would they do that?
17. P: Yeah, yeah
18. R: Say - say for example you had to – em - go into hospital for an operation and you
19. weren't going to be able to say - for, example, walk for a week or so, would you then call
20. on professional help? - Or would that again be back to the family?
21. P: I would ask the family, yeah, yeah.

(Transcript Int 3)

To conclude, the programmatic relevance of those within the family circle, for help in the first instance, renders absence of close family members or those ‘inside the family circle’ an accountable matter. This is not to imply that all social actors will state that a family member *is* the first port of call. Rather, it is to state that in talk there are sufficient accounts, and curious accounts and if a social actor fails to mention certain family members, co-conversationists can routinely enquire as to their whereabouts (extract 6:12).

‘Insiders’ and ‘first-position’ category pairs

I have claimed that selections of help-providers are routinely sequenced and this is a central accountable organising property of situated decision-making. From the transcripts, it is possible to further specify how ‘sequencing work’ is organised. Sacks (1966) referred to ‘first-position’ category pairs. From the sub-set of preferred sources of help, or those normatively constituted as having obligations to provide help, there are SRPs that are considered as ‘first-position pairs’ (Sacks 1966, p51).

Extract 6:14

1. R: What about on the home front then? If a problem crops up at home – err - it could be a
2. domestic problem?
3. P: A domestic problem or - ?
4. R: It could be a domestic problem or child with a health problem or financial problem?
5. P: Well, domestic problem we sit down talk about it, compromise in whatever way, sort
6. it out
7. R: And is that you and your wife or - ?
8. P: Oh yeah, if we have any arguments we usually sit down and talk about it, find out
9. what the problem is and compromise
10. R: If there was a problem that you and your wife couldn’t sort out, say – erm - say you
11. had some worry that was ongoing; who would you go to then for advice?
12. P: Maybe talk to the parents,
13. R: So family would be your first port of call?
14. P: Oh yeah, they would definitely be the first port of call. I know there’s other groups

15. around, but I'd go to the family first and try to resolve it.
(Transcript Int12)

In extract 6:14, it is possible to observe that sequencing work is not just organised at the level of collectivity, but in addition it is possible to identify that sequencing work is also organised around 'first-position' category pairs. Knowledge of possible sequences of help-seeking and category candidates for 'first pairs', provides for the sense of (i) P's utterance at line 4 and (ii) my reading of this utterance. Although at line 4 the participant fails to make explicit who he is referring to when he says 'we sit down and talk about it', the interviewer is able to guess correctly that the participant means himself and his wife: 'is that you and your wife?' To summarise, my correct reading of P's condensed speech ('we usually sit down and talk about it') results from:

1. Knowledge of the programmatic relevance of the family for help in this context (domestic problem).
2. Knowledge about sequencing work and that sequencing work is organised around 'first-position pairs'.
3. An inter-subjective understanding that the SRP husband-wife is in this instance a suitable candidate for the first-position category pair.

Sacks referred to 'relative sequencing', stating that individuals moved through a sequence of preferred sources of help organised around first-position pairs (1966). Sacks claimed that only on the basis of absence of a candidate for a first-position, can a second-position candidate be called upon. Selection of a next preferred option is contingent on non-availability of a first. In extract 6:15 below the participant also

makes reference to a preferred sequence. She states that her husband is 'first and foremost', followed by other family members. What the participant makes relevant is not just a sequence of help-seeking, but a sequence characterised by a first-position category pair. If a first choice is not available, then the help-seeker moves to a second choice. Selections are sequenced according to preference and a contextually relevant sequence.

Extract 6:15

R: Ok, so that's sort of general, that's fine. Erm - can you tell me who you would turn to for help with bringing up your children?

P: First and foremost my husband, then after that family (**R:** Ah ha) - particularly my mum or his mum.

(Transcript Int4)

Across data sets, participants displayed their knowledge of relative sequencing as an accountable property of situated decision-making. They made use of this intersubjective resource in responding to the researcher's questions or other conversational demands that rendered this resource relevant.

Extract 6:16

B: Really, asking for help from outside agencies really is the very, very last stage

C: They might even go to the mosque

R: So people designated as helpers, or elders or the Imam - so maybe that would be the first port of call?

B: Our parents, maybe our dad or you would go to someone who is the head of your family. - And if that head of the family can't do much then you would probably go to someone - maybe -. You go through different stages before you would ask for help outside - maybe a cousin⁷ or something

C: It just happens within the family really.

(Transcript FG18)

⁷ From discussions with the community researchers the category cousin has some significance in the British-Asian population in terms of being routinely considered a candidate for 'early' help.

In extract 6:16 participants make reference to going through ‘different stages’. Participants state ‘our parents’ are the first port of call and if they can’t do much, then maybe a cousin⁸ and so forth. The researcher’s suggestion of elders is corrected by B who simply re-states preference for family. One moves through candidates for first pair positions, in order of preference, or priority. A cousin can move into an earlier position if someone higher up the ‘priority ladder’ is unavailable. However, outside help remains ‘a very, very last resort’ and it ‘just happens within the family’.

‘Last pairs’: identifying a further accountable feature of sequencing work

Sacks identified and underlined the importance of the first-position category pair as a feature of relative sequencing. From this study it is possible to identify not just that decision-making, in relation to the topic ‘help-seeking’ is organised around first pairs, but also that decision-making is organised around a ‘*last-position*’ category pair. In extract 6:16 above, sequencing is characterised by first choices and ‘last stages’ with outside help a very, very last stage’. Thus, it is possible to claim that participants’ sequencing work takes account of first choices and last choices. Whilst categories from situated ‘I’ are routinely first choices, those designated ‘outsider’ status are very much a last resort. There is a sense from the transcripts that it is not just that those chosen as a last resort are last in a sequence, but rather last choices are a *residual* option, only to be considered when all other options fail. This observation extends Sacks’s observations on relative sequencing and is of some considerable practical import.

Extract 6:17

R: So would she go to social services?

B: No way

C: Absolutely not

B: That's way off (gesticulating into the distance), that's way off - that's like the, the absolute last resort, that's the end.

(Transcript FG3)

In the extract above, my question makes relevant a 'last-position' category pair. For participants social services is 'a last resort' or 'the end'. In this study reference to the category social services, routinely and reflexively invoked a 'last pair' position. I take up the implications of 'last pairs' in the chapters that follow.

Use of prior knowledge as a central accountable property of situated decision-making.

How does relative sequencing work? Extending Sacks's observations on relative sequencing

Whilst consideration of candidates for a 'first-position' pair is organised in and through normative understandings, selection of a 'first pair' is always occasioned. Matters to do with 'the problem', availability of potential candidates and resources to respond, all impact on category selection. In extract 6:19 below the participant makes clear that for different problems, different helpers are relevant. Selection of 'first pair', however, is not random. As I indicated above; there is an orderliness to this which allows any social actor to make an 'educated' guess about who another might initially seek help from. Whilst it is not possible to specify at the level of category concept first pair positions, it is possible to identify further accountable

properties of decision-making. The observations I make in this section about *how* relative sequencing works further extend Sacks's observations.

Extract 6:18

1. R: You'd go to your friends first?
2. P: Yeah I would even before my parents, I don't know why, but I would -
3. R: Are there certain things that you'd go to your friends for and certain things that you'd
4. got to your family for?
5. P: If it was money problems, I probably go to my parents because I know they've been OK
6. with that. But if it's something that I've really got myself into bother with, then I'd speak to
7. my friends. Family would probably have a go at me, whereas friends might not. - And if I
8. know a friend could help me out, then I would probably go there first. - But em - I have in
9. the past and I've been in tears, "I' can't cope with the children", I will ring me mum and
10. say "look I'm having a bad day", but I'll get it thrown back in me face. "Oh you've got to
11. get on with it", do you know what I mean? She's the old generation and "you've just got to
12. get on with it and manage". - Erm, and I feel a failure if I ring her, so it's better to speak to
13. talk to somebody that I know is going through the same thing I think - I mean she worked
14. nights and everything, did my mum and brought us three up.

(Transcript Int22)

From analysis of extract 6:18, the following conclusions can be drawn about *how* individuals select first position category pairs. First, whilst the participant would select her parents for help in certain situations in other situations she would go to her friend (lines 5-7). There is a reflexive relationship between the formulated problem and category selection. Second, the participant deploys her prior *knowledge (experience)* of those she stands in relationships with and the help previously offered to select from available sources (lines 7- 13). In chapter 9 I take up in more detail the first point. In this chapter I will focus on the second observation.

A central accountable property of situated decision-making is that prior experience of help-seeking encounters/relationships can be used to make *predictions* about the likely outcome of *future* requests for help. Prior help-seeking experiences impact on hypothetical help-seeking decisions. Using, or

making reference to this experience in decision-making to make predictions about help in the future is socially sanctioned. There is a sense that in and through personal helping relationships, one can come to understand and expect certain kinds of help simply by reference to the history of the help-giving/help-receiving relationship. In extract 6:18, the participant's personal knowledge of who help can be received from is a key resource (what she can expect on the basis of her prior experience in encounters/relationship with her friends and her parents). **P** states, 'if I *know* a friend who *can* help me out, then I will probably go there first' (lines 7-8, emphasis added). **P** does not select any friend; she selects a friend who she *knows* can help her out. **P** states that in certain circumstances she will not go to her parents. This is based on prior experiences of asking them for help and having it 'thrown back in me face' (line 10.) That she would choose not to seek help from her parents in certain circumstances is also based on her prior knowledge. I (**R**) take **P**'s explanation as an accountable response because, as a competent member of the culture, I share in the sense of her account and that use of prior knowledge is an accountable resource in situated decision-making. In the following exchange from a focus group the questions that are raised reflect the participants' orientation to this central accountable property of decision-making.

Extract 6:19

R: Imagine there's a problem, which you don't think you can go to family for. Erm - say you were having difficulties with your husband - I know that's hard to imagine (laughing). But say you were - and also you were worried about his behaviour towards the children, he's abusive, verbally aggressive with them, you think he's depressed -

P: Oh, I'd definitely go to my doctor, she's someone I can go to for something like that

R: Why your doctor?

P: I've known her for a long time. She's been our family doctor for a number of years. Erm - I've been to her before, not that I've had problems like that before, but after my second child was born, I was struggling, I went to her - you know - to talk. She was very understanding and, you know,

respectful. You don't feel you are being judged. I could definitely talk to her, discretely - I know she would listen and not do anything hasty. I've had to go quite regularly with the children and you know you get to know each other. She's someone I can trust.

(Transcript Int30)

I stated in chapter 5 that it was a mistake to consider selection of a doctor amongst others as a preferred source of support as simply an anomaly and that preferred sources of support could not be definitively mapped onto particular category concepts for all occasions. In extract 6:19 above, it is possible to see that although I have ruled out the family as a source of support in my question to **P**, for **P** there are other contenders for help. She can go to her doctor on the basis that she has achieved a relationship of trust with this person. In extract 6:19, it is the participant's knowledge of the history of her help-seeking/receiving relationship with her doctor ('I've been to her before, she was very understanding') that provides for her assessment that she can go back there again.

Extract 6:20

R: So who do you think Jenny is going to go to for help?

D: Her own mother, her mother=

B: =sisters=

D: =to Mike or friends

R: So who do you think would be her first port of call?

E: Depends what sort of relationship she has with her mother, whether she talks about things like that with her mother. She might go to close friends, if she got those links//

D: Depends what sort of a relationship she has with her partner - but then he's sort of part of the problem at the moment, isn't he?

(Transcript FG23)

In extract 6:20, that prior knowledge is an accountable property of decision-making, provides for the sense of the questions raised by participants **D** and **E**. Participants ask questions about the history of relationships, regarding help-seeking. **D** states 'depends what sort of relationship she has with her mother, whether she talks about things like that with her mother'. **E** in the contiguous

utterance that follows, states, 'depends what sort of a relationship she has with her partner'. Participants **D** and **E** are seeking details of a relationship history regarding help-seeking/providing in order to use this information as a resource in their decision-making.

Whilst the observation that prior knowledge of help-seeking encounters is a key resource in decision-making may seem mundane, in the conclusion I will discuss this finding further and the implications for family support services.

'Outside' help a residual resource: Crossing the boundary, exploring the interface between 'inside' and 'outside'

Exclusive 'I'

In terms of the observations I have made so far in this chapter, for help with personal family problems which impact on the care of children, help 'in the first instance' centres on collection 'I', with the categories that constitute the device family routinely invoked. In contrast, help constituted as 'outside' the family can be routinely constituted as 'a last resort'. To further substantiate preference for collection 'I', it is also possible to conclude that where 'insiders' are deemed available, there appears to be a kind of *exclusivity* to this collection. On many occasions, the availability of family and friends or those on the 'inside', acts to *rule out*, those on the 'outside'.

There are a number of ways in which ‘insiders’ can become unavailable and these are not just to do with physical availability. Where ‘insiders’ are unavailable an individual may then decide to go ‘outside’. However, this is routinely contingent on non-availability of the achieved collection ‘I’.

Extract 6:21

1. **R:** Absolutely. - So, is Sabiha going to go to for help?
2. **B:** Well she could actually go to her family and see what help they can give her
3. **A:** If they’ve supported her in this marriage, then she can go to her family first=
4. **C:** =or friends=
5. **D:** =or a counsellor. If she doesn’t want to talk to anybody, then she can talk to a
6. counsellor, if she doesn’t want anyone to know this is going on - if she doesn’t want her
7. family to know, the citizens advice bureau, or Samaritans, you know - people that can
8. help in that matter
9. **C:** Marriage counsellors for both of them//
10. **B:** But in realistic, will she really go, in realistic situation?
11. **D:** If the family doesn’t support them, then where is she going to turn to, if she’s got
12. nobody to, to help her//,
13. **B:** But in today’s world, right, I know a lot of people that don’t go anywhere, they just
14. suffer with it. They don’t want to let it out of the bag.

(Transcript FG10)

In extract 6:21, participants are considering where the fictitious character Sabiha in the vignette can seek help. **B** suggests family and in the response from **A** that follows this is further qualified, ‘if they’ve supported her in this marriage then she can go to her family first’ (participants use prior knowledge as a resource and are formulating in situ collection ‘I’). The contiguous utterance from **C** ‘or friends’ adds to possible sources of help (line 3). At line 4, **D** further adds to the developing list of possible sources of help: ‘or a counsellor if she doesn’t want to talk to anybody’ (line 5). However, her suggestion of counsellor is *contingent* on Sabiha not wanting to talk to ‘anybody’. **D**’s reference to ‘anybody’ is heard sequentially as meaning family and friends and serves to demarcate those who should be turned to, from those who are contingent considerations, only to be

considered if family and friends are not available. In this utterance the counsellor is not 'somebody' who can be turned to straight off, rather, she can only turn to a counsellor on the basis of non-availability of family and friends. In Sacks's work on suicide he was interested in the suicidal person's use of, and reference to, 'no-one to turn to' (1966). Sacks argued that the standardisation of those who are obligated to provide help in the first instance means that if that collection is not available, then one can conclude that one has no-one to turn to. It is the routine inferences that can be drawn reflexively in relation to the invocation of the categories from 'family' and 'friends' which provide for the logic of **D**'s expression, 'if she doesn't want to talk to anybody, then she can talk to a counsellor' (line 5). The exclusivity of SRPs that are routinely considered to provide help first, renders the suggestion of 'outside' help a contingent suggestion.

Sequencing: Does selection of 'O' always follow 'no-one to turn to'?

There is something further in the above extract. At line 9, **B** states, 'but in realistic, will she really go, in realistic situation?' In this extract whilst participants consider the family programmatically relevant for help, suggestion of 'outside' help, 'marriage counsellors', is met with this query from **B**. Whilst there is an exclusivity to those who should be turned to, in the first instance, it does not necessarily follow that 'outside' help is considered in this way when 'inside' help is not available. Rather, suggestions of 'outside' help frequently stimulated queries and questions. On the basis that one has no-one to turn to, one can seek

outside help, but this is not routine. It is not presumed by participants that the fictitious character *will* use outside help in this instance.

In extract 6:22 a similar pattern is co-produced in talk. The availability of 'O' does *not*, even on the basis of 'no-one' to turn to, compensate for non-availability of 'I'.

Extract 6:22

C: It's really, really difficult - I mean when I went through what I went through, I didn't confide in anybody, not even my mum, or my dad. I didn't confide in my mum and dad because I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want to confide in my friends because one of them would probably have come to the house and tell my mother-in-law where to stick it, she would, she'd be really mad, and I didn't want to upset them. Because my friends, who really cared and loved me - and I didn't want them to see to see me, I didn't allow them to see me. - When I moved into a rented house I didn't allow them to see me - S and my other friends - because I didn't want them to see me like that. - So I didn't confide in my friends, I didn't confide in my sisters. - I think because I wasn't in my home town, I just pretended everything was fine, and my friends said "why didn't you tell us it was like that?" And you do definitely try to make out as if everything is just fine. And I definitely would not have gone to a welfare agency, that was a no.

(Transcript FG18)

Prior to the start of the interview extract above, the young British-Asian woman had been providing an account of how she felt her child was being abused by her mother-in-law. She described becoming very emotionally unwell and feeling desperate. However, she felt unable to share this problem with family and friends. Given the nature of the problem and how she felt about disclosing it to her family and friends, they were unavailable to her. However, she closes her account with the statement, 'and I definitely would not have gone to a welfare agency that was a no'. I have shown how individuals considered outside help; this was described

as 'a last resort', a *residual* option, only to be considered when one was desperate and all other options had been exhausted. In some instances, however, professional relationships were not seen as a comparable alternative to 'insider' relationships. Participants constituted collection 'I' as preferred and in many instances exclusive for help and this collection was not easily replaced by collection 'O'.

From the above observations it is possible to make the following significant claims:

- (i) Having 'no-one' to turn to is a stimulus for seeking 'outside' help.
- (ii) Having 'no-one to turn to' does not however, necessitate that an individual will always seek 'outside' help; this is an occasioned matter. Non-availability of 'I' is not always compensated for by availability of 'O'.

Is a last resort position generically relevant?

For the most part, where participants were asked questions about 'child-welfare', participants oriented to a consideration of the *social* helping agencies which provide support to families and safeguards for children. Where social helping agencies were considered they were very much 'a last resort'. A 'last resort position' was, however, not rendered *generically* relevant in relation to all (outside) services suggested as possible help for families and child-welfare. In particular, where a service was considered that offered *specialist* support, such as

‘medical provision’, such services were considered a suitable option for help or indeed may have been constituted as a first choice. As a way into considering this difference it is possible to conclude that help in the form of talking, listening, advising, supporting parenting capacity, dealing with relationship conflicts and so forth are matters where those ‘in-house’ are seen as first contenders for the role and properly ‘qualified’ to help. Professional agencies might offer this form of help, but so do those ‘in-house’. In contrast and in the case of other forms of family help, for example, medical help, this kind of knowledge is not routinely held in-house and therefore it is perfectly legitimate to go outside as a first port of call.

Extract 6:23

R: So, where would you go for help?

A: I’d go to my doctor

B: Why the doctor?

C: Well, my friends can’t give me the medical, information wise. She (pointing to her friend) can’t give me the medical.

(Transcript FG3)

What is interesting about this extract is that A’s friend is not seen as the preferred source of help where the problem is ‘medical’. Her friend *cannot* give ‘information wise’ or ‘the medical’. From the selected research materials certain family problems to do with ‘medical’ matters, for example, were constituted as the *legitimate* work of ‘outside’ or expert help. From the above extract A’s

selection is accounted for on the basis that friends don't have this knowledge. We don't routinely expect family and friends to offer specialist medical help.

Extract 6:24

1. **R:** What about – erm – imagine - you, say you were really worried about Sarah – in
2. school, for example. Behaviour problems, indicating things weren't quite right?
3. **P:** I think for that you would have to seek professional help then, because that's kind of
4. a specialist area that as a parent you don't know much about and you would have to be
5. guided by what the school were suggesting who probably know more about these
6. things. They could maybe suggest something
7. **R:** And how would you then feel about going for that kind of help?
8. **P:** I suppose, it's maybe different because you're doing it for your children and it would
9. be easier to do. Erm - you would think it was the right thing to do, whereas if it was for
10. yourself (laughing), then you definitely wouldn't want to
11. **R:** Yeah, maybe it's more difficult to ask for certain types of help, certainly a number
12. of women I have spoken to say they would feel it was difficult to ask for help for
13. themselves because they feel like they're not a good mother or.
14. **P:** Yeah that's right (laughing).

(Transcript Int3)

In extract 6:24, **P** states that she can ask for professional help for her child Sarah, because 'that's kind of a specialist area'. On the basis of this problem and that 'as a parent you don't know much about that', then the school who 'probably know more about these things' is a legitimate port of call (lines 4-6). She draws a contrast, however, between help in that context and help for herself (8-10). Her statement: 'if it was for yourself (laughing), then you definitely wouldn't want to' invokes laughter, and is by implication difficult (easy/difficult contrast used). In the interview I seek to expand on her difficulty (lines 11-13) and invoke the generality of her claim ('a number of women ...'). I suggest that seeking help for herself implies she is 'not a good mother'. My proposition, suggests that asking for help for herself implies some kind of breach, such that the category ascription 'not a good mother' can follow. The sense of my proposition can be understood sequentially in terms of the achieved contrast between specialist help and help for herself. The skills of mothering are properly the preserve of mothers and this

contrasts with *specialist* help for her child, with which she can properly/legitimately be guided by those outside.

Discussion

The extant literature on help-seeking offers stage models as a *priori* descriptions of help-seeking. All these models suggest that help-seeking follows a sequence with the identification of 'the problem' such as syndrome or symptom as the starting point in this sequence. From the transcripts, whilst categories of help-seekers may make reference to, or search for an organisationally relevant problem (child abuse, injury), it is on account of 'no-one to turn to' that help from 'outside' may be sought. In taking situated decision-making as a focus it has been possible to see that participants' sequencing work is quite differently organised than that suggested by the stage models (chapter 1).

From this study, 'sequencing work' is a central accountable property of decision-making organised in and through participants' reference to first and last position category pairs. 'Outside' help is 'a last resort', an option which is not simply constituted as a last point in sequencing work, but rather a *residual* option if all else fails (and then there is no automatic selection of this collectivity).

Studies of help-seeking have sought the 'variables' or 'factors' that mediate movement between stages of the help-seeking model. In this study, focusing on categorisation work as occasioned but not random, has prompted analysis of the

systematic methods participants employ in selecting first choices of help. In taking this analytic focus it has been possible to arrive at a very central accountable property of decision-making in situated talk, namely that participants make use of or refer to personal and prior knowledge of help-seeking encounters in decision-making. Whilst it is not possible to generalise from the data, this finding extends the current observations available in the extant literature and also Sacks's observations in 'Search for Help' (1966). Prior knowledge is a key resource in situated decision-making, and participants use this knowledge to make predictions or assessments of future help-seeking possibilities.

That prior knowledge of help-seeking encounters is a central accountable property of decision making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking' has some significant implications for those who offer 'outside help' with family problems. Those categories on the 'inside' already stand in personal and prior relationships with the help-seeker. The help-seeker shares an inter-subjective understanding of the limits/potential of 'give' and 'take' in these relationships and, importantly, uses this knowledge in selection work. That selection work is organised in this way, as a central accountable property of decision-making, suggests some significant obstacles for those who offer 'outside'. From the observations in this chapter, it is possible to suggest that not only are welfare professionals in a weak starting position because they are frequently seen to duplicate the work of the family ('talking, listening and advising'), but, in addition, given that experience is a key resource in decision-making their outsider position further compounds this difficulty.

From an analysis of 'sequencing work', it is possible to speculate that the problems that family support services face are not generic. There may be obstacles *particular* to those who seek to remedy family problems which impact on the care of children. It may be that experts such as doctors, who own a corpus of medical knowledge⁹, find less competition from those 'inside' who do not routinely own the same knowledge. In contrast, and from this study, the qualifications for help for problems to do with family and the care of children are routinely constituted as owned by those 'inside'. As I indicated, there appears to be a kind of *exclusivity* to situated 'I'. On many occasions the *availability* of family and friends or those on the inside acts to *rule out* those on the outside. Whilst not wanting to generalise from the data, the claims made in this chapter have clear relevance for the social helping agencies that offer family support and I take this up further in the concluding chapter, where I discuss avenues for future research

⁹ Sharrock (1974) in a paper 'On owning knowledge' stated that certain categories (such as doctors in this instance) are routinely seen to 'own' a body of knowledge. It is possible to apply Sharrock's analysis of category-bound knowledge to the differences constituted in this study between those who own a distinct corpus of knowledge and those who do not. Experts or specialists in this study were routinely constituted as owning a distinct body of knowledge, knowledge that was different to that of family. This was, however, not noted in relation to 'child welfare agencies'.

Chapter 7

Some observations on the interactional use of the descriptors 'close', 'comfortable' and 'trusted'

Introduction

In the previous chapter I demonstrated that participants routinely occasioned *seeking* help for certain kinds of problems such as those of parenting as 'difficult'¹⁰. Decisions made about appropriate sources of help in these research encounters paid attention to moral considerations, with 'sequencing work' a central accountable property of situated decision-making. I also claimed that in selecting 'first-position' pairs participants drew on, or made reference to prior knowledge of (hypothetical) help-seeking encounters. In this chapter I will draw attention to the conceptual grammar of those 'inside' to do with 'close', 'comfortable' and 'trusted', and show how these descriptors are deployed in talk-in-interaction as complimentary resources to prior knowledge.

In this chapter I make the following claims:

- The descriptors 'close', 'comfortable' and 'trusted' can be routinely used to qualify category selections in response to questions about help-seeking.

¹⁰ This study has established that seeking help in relation to family problems and child-welfare was routinely considered difficult. It may be that seeking help in relation to other problems is also difficult such as 'addiction'; but my focus here is on child welfare and family support in particular.

- The descriptors ‘close’ ‘comfortable’ and ‘trusted’ served to sub-set preferred sources of support from a larger programmatically relevant set.
- These descriptors enabled participants to anticipate positive outcomes of hypothetical help-seeking efforts.
- The substantive activities routinely associated with the category child-welfare agencies provided for routine inferences such as ‘take your kids off you’. On account of these routine inferences, the category child-welfare presents as not routinely invoking assurances of positive help in these research conversations.
- The SRP trust/risk presents as having some central relevance in situated decision-making in these conversations.

Identifying a conceptual grammar: ‘close’, ‘trusted’ and ‘comfortable’

Extract 7:1

R: So, you’d try and sort things yourself first?

P: Yeah we’d try and sort it out ourselves first. Err - erm - I think K would approach her parents and family first, before I would approach anybody - erm - because - I’ve only got like - there’s only like my mother - who I’m not like massively close to - that I can talk to about things like that - err - I always feel sort of - err - uncomfortable with things like that. But I think K would actually go to her family first either her mum and dad or her aunty in Morecambe. I’m not sure who I’d go to be honest - very difficult. - K’s family first (**R:**yeah, yeah) - she’s comfortable speaking to them about things like that, whereas I’m not comfortable speaking to my parents about things like that, so I leave it to her

R: Why is K more comfortable talking to her family?

P: Err - just a lot closer really

(Transcript Int6)

In extract 7:1 the participant qualifies his category selections using the descriptors ‘comfortable’/ ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘close’/ ‘not close’. **P** states that his wife **K** would speak to her parents or her aunty and later in his utterance her ‘family’

because she is comfortable speaking to them. K would speak to her parents because she is 'closer' to them. In the extract below the descriptors 'close' and 'trust' similarly feature in talk:

Extract 7:2

1. R: Can I just move you down to the second question- if Jenny's going to get
2. help, who do you think she would turn to for help?
3. C: In the first instance?
4. R: In the first instance
5. C: Her mother=
6. A: =mother or sisters
7. R: Mother or sisters?
8. C: Because there's no dialogue at home, if she couldn't have that dialogue at
9. home- in the first instance, it will be her mother rather than her sisters, a close friend
10. even=
11. A: =somebody she can trust//
12. B: Exactly
13. R: Somebody she can trust=
14. A: = yeah somebody she can trust
15. B: Yeah
16. C: Yeah

(Transcript FG 15)

In extract 7:2 C suggests a 'close' friend as a suitable source of help (line 9). The introduction of someone 'close' is further qualified by A, who suggests somebody she can 'trust' (line 11). In extract 7:3 below a similar pattern is discernible:

Extract 7:3

1. R: What about Mike, is he going to go anywhere for help?
2. A: I think Mike would probably go for the same type of person, somebody that he can
3. trust - It might be his best mate, it might be his father, it might be his mother
4. R: It might be his mother?
5. A: Err - somebody again who he knows it isn't going to go any further with//
6. B: It doesn't say whether Mike's close to family or not does it? Because if he's not
7. close to family then he wouldn't have any body to go to
8. C: I think Mike in the first instance would be to have a blasé conversation with this
9. colleague, a friend that he has trusted for a long time, but it would be an average
10. conversation, it would be a bit dropped in – err - it wouldn't be out and out questions
11. : "what would you do? and I'm in this situation", it would be a conversation which
12. was - somewhat -, be - err - searching for help. But he wouldn't walk up and
13. say, "I've got a problem", that's asking for help, he's gonna then say search for help, without

14. asking for it, you know what I mean?

(Transcript FG15)

In this extract focus group participants are considering where Mike the male fictitious character in the vignette would seek help. A suggests that Mike can go to his best¹¹ mate, father or mother (lines 2-3), selections are generated *in situ* and thus qualified by the descriptor 'trust'. B queries whether Mike has any 'close' family suggesting that if Mike has no 'close' family, then Mike might not have anybody to go to (lines 6-7). Again the descriptors 'close' and 'trust' appear serve to qualify category suggestions and selections.

Inferential adequacy and category selection: What do the descriptors 'close'/'trusted' and 'comfortable' routinely *achieve* in talk about help-seeking?

Achieving a sub-set of 'I'

For conventional sociologists analysis can stop at the identification of this conceptual grammar, establishing repeated use of a vocabulary of 'trust', 'close' or 'comfortable' meets analytic requirements. However, the analytic requirements of MCA ask: *what more* can be learned from detailed analysis of the *interactional use* and hence work of this vocabulary?

¹¹ 'Trust' generates *in situ* 'best-mate'. Where 'trust' or 'close' are accountable inferences of any category concept then that category stands as an appropriate selection in this context. I discuss this further in a later section of this chapter.

The demands of both the interview and focus group settings required that participants produced accountable responses to questions about help-seeking; that is, responses that could be treated as 'correct' or 'appropriate' for practical purposes by both speakers and hearers. It is possible to observe that where an individual was marked as 'close' or 'trusted' or 'comfortable', the selected category selections were routinely treated as *inferentially adequate* regarding the provision of help. These category selections met few calls to account, explain or elaborate. It is possible to conclude from analysis of extracts 7:1 to 7:3 that categories qualified by the descriptor 'close', 'comfortable' or 'trusted' on these occasions met known-in-common *selection criteria* for help.

Given that these descriptors enabled categories to be routinely treated as correct in response to questions about help-seeking and family problems (that is they were routinely rendered *critical* for help), it is possible to conclude that interactionally these descriptors allowed participants to select (sub-set) preferred 'insiders' from a larger programmatically relevant collection. Returning to extract 7:1 the participant qualifies his category selections using the descriptors 'close' and 'comfortable', and also *differentiates* between a potential range of categories using 'close'/ 'not close', 'comfortable'/ 'not comfortable'. Whilst P understands that family members are programmatically relevant for help, the descriptors 'close' and 'comfortable' allow him to achieve *in situ* a subset of collection 'I' from a potential larger programmatically relevant set. His wife is 'comfortable' talking to her parents but he is 'uncomfortable' speaking to his mother. He uses 'comfortable'/ 'not comfortable' to achieve a boundary between sources of help

that are preferred and those that are not preferred. P's methods of delineation are accepted by the researcher who, as a competent member of the culture, also shares in the relevance of a boundary between 'comfortable'/'not comfortable'. Thus, these methods assist in 'sequencing' work (see my observations in the previous chapter).

The descriptors 'close', 'trust' and 'comfortable' whilst not mapping directly onto category concepts such as mother (not all mothers are 'close'), work to sub-set preferred 'I' from programmatically relevant 'I'. Thus, these descriptors present as key resources in situated decision-making in these contexts.

Extract 7:4

1. C: My next-door neighbour's a police man. I don't think I would go personally to the
2. police, but I would go to someone like that, do you know what I mean? He's a policeman
3. and I'd probably go there because he's also a friend. But I would not go personally to
4. – you wouldn't walk into a police station, you wouldn't go to social services - but if
5. someone was a friend - then that's different//
6. B: Or she'd go to her neighbour//
7. D: You'd go to your neighbour or your friend//
8. E: Your neighbour? But you would never actually go specifically and approach them, I
9. wouldn't any way, I don't know about anyone else? - I would never actually go and
10. physically approach them//
11. A: It depends on how well you know the people as well though.- Because you wouldn't
12. like - I've come down, I've come down here, or I'd have gone to Clare or Katie. But I
13. wouldn't have gone to anybody else about anything, because you don't know what other
14. people are going to be like//
15. C: I wouldn't.
16. F: I'm a talker. I would have gone mental if I hadn't have talked to anybody that would
17. listen//
18. A: Yeah, but if you went to her over there, or her there, and say something - they may take
19. it upon themselves to take it to social services and then say right, OK, then "I've had this
20. woman on my doorstep crying because her boyfriend's beating her kids up"//
21. C: That's what I mean, would you have gone to somebody? (E: Who you don't really
22. trust?) No//
23. A: Or somebody official like=
24. E: =social services?
25. B: I would have turned to my neighbours=
26. C: =anybody like neighbours friends//

27. **B:** Somebody close that would talk to you

(Transcript FG3)

In extract 7:4 participants suggest friends and neighbours as possible sources of support. Across the exchange what is clear, however, is that it is not just any neighbour that is a possible source of support, but those who are 'trusted'. A indicates that she would have gone to her neighbours 'Clare or Katie', but not 'anybody else' (lines 11-13). A co-produces a sub-set of preferred neighbours with A and C, demarcating a sub-set of preferred neighbours on the basis of how well they are known (lines 11-22). Thus, the neighbour who is a candidate for help ('somebody') is differentiated from the neighbour who is just 'anybody'. As the exchange progresses participant B introduces the descriptor 'close' by way of both qualification and summary (line 27). Thus, across this exchange a sub-set of neighbours is defined using the descriptor 'close' and a boundary is achieved between those who are constituted as 'close' (somebody) from those who are 'anybody'.

Thus, it is possible to claim from the above extracts that the descriptors 'trust', 'close' and 'comfortable' can work to identify preferred relationships from those that are not preferred. Given this conclusion it is possible to identify that relationships described as 'close', 'comfortable' or 'trusted' can be *critical* for help in this context¹². Use of these descriptors enables participants to subset and

¹² Context is always co-produced and occasioned. However, participants have been asked to consider family problems that impact on the care of children and this is therefore a referent for the conversations that follow.

demarcate selected 'insiders' from both a programmatically relevant set of 'insiders' and those 'outside'.

Identifying a reflexive relationship between interactional resources: 'close', 'trust', 'comfortable' and 'someone known for a long time'

In the extracts discussed above (7:1 -7:4) there is clearly a connectedness between the descriptors 'trust', 'close' and 'comfortable'. In extract 7:1, the suggestion of 'close friend' reflexively enables the category ascription 'trust'. Similarly, in extract 7:3 suggestion of someone 'trusted' makes relevant the category ascription 'close'. In addition, however, the descriptors 'close', 'trust' or 'comfortable' appear to work together with prior knowledge as an accountable property of decision-making. In extract 7.3 above A suggests that Mike can seek help from somebody he can 'trust'. A expands on his suggestion in his next utterance stating 'somebody again who he *knows* it isn't going to go any further with' (emphasis added, line 5). He selects his 'best mate' not just any mate (line 3). C talks of 'a friend he has trusted for a long time' (line 9). In examining the socio-logic of this utterance it is possible to conclude that reflexively, in relation to the topic help-seeking, 'trust' generates somebody that is known for a long time. 'Trust' invokes reflexively a help-giving/receiving relationship history. In extract 7:3 participants display the connectedness of the resource prior knowledge and the descriptors 'close' and 'trust' in their decision-making. At line 9 the resources are combined in the utterance: 'trusted for a long time'. Extract 7:5 provides a further example:

Extract 7:5

R: So, if you experienced difficulties again, who would you turn to?

P: Oh back to Josie again, I can rely on her

R: What is it about Josie that makes you feel you can rely on her?

P: I've known her for a long time, she was there for me in the past, I know she'd help me again, - I could go to her with anything, I can talk to her about anything

R: So she's someone you feel close to even though you've now moved to another part of town?

P: Oh yeah, we're still close, even if I haven't spoken to her for ages, when I speak to her, it's like -, it's like, em, like it was yesterday when I saw her-if you know what I mean, I can trust her

(Transcript BPINT 15)

In extract 7:5 the young woman who earlier in the interview has recounted traumatic experiences of sexual assault by her mother's partner, states that she would go back to Josie (her neighbour) in response to the question from myself about possible future difficulties. When pushed to qualify her selection of 'Josie' and why it is she can 'rely on her' she states: 'I've known her for a long time, she was there for me in the past, I know she'd help me again'. Here the participant demonstrates that her prior knowledge of seeking help from Josie enables her to select Josie as a candidate on this occasion and make predictions about future help. In the next utterance from the researcher, the researcher as a competent member of the culture, offers the category ascription 'close': 'so she's someone you feel close to...?' The category ascription 'close' appears to logically follow from P's description; it is offered as a summary. Again, the category ascription 'close' gains relevance in relation to the participant's characterisation of Josie as someone she has known for a long time. As the exchange progresses the connectedness between the resources 'trust' and 'prior knowledge' is also manifest in the final utterance from P: 'even if I haven't spoken to her for ages,

To describe someone as 'close' generates *in situ* that one has an established relationship with another; similarly with 'trust' or 'comfortable'. Thus the resources prior knowledge and these descriptors work together reflexively; they are mutually implicative and rendered central in decision-making in this context. Deployment of one resource renders available reflexively the other decision-making resource.

'Close', 'trust', 'comfortable' and 'prediction work': anticipating outcomes of help-seeking efforts.

Whilst category concepts described as 'close' or 'trusted' and so forth do not map directly onto any category concepts what deployment of these categories routinely achieves, is to enable participants to anticipate positive outcome of one's own or another's request for help. These descriptors allow (reflexively in relation to the topic help-seeking) predictions to be made about future helping-seeking trajectories. Returning to extract 7:5 above it is this organisation of practical reasoning which provides for P's predictive statement about her 'close' neighbour Josie: 'she's helped me in the past, she can help me again'. Similarly, in extract 7:3 the statement from P: 'somebody again who he knows it isn't going to go any further with' (line5) rests for its inter-subjective sense, sequentially, on the prior description of his 'best mate', 'father' and 'mother' as 'trusted'. The following extract provides a further example:

Extract 7:6

R: Imagine there's a problem, which you don't think you can go to family for. Erm - say you were having difficulties with your husband - I know that's hard to imagine (laughing). But say you were -

and also you were worried about his behaviour towards the children, he's abusive, verbally aggressive with them, you think he's depressed-

P: Oh, I'd definitely go to my doctor, she's someone I can go to for something like that

R: Why your doctor?

P: I've known her for a long time. She's been our family doctor for a number of years. Erm - I've been to her before, not that I've had problems like that before, but after my second child was born, I was struggling, I went to her- you know - to talk. She was very understanding and you know respectful. You don't feel you are being judged. I could definitely talk to her, discretely- I know she would listen and not do anything hasty. I've had to go quite regularly with the children and you know you get to know each other. She's someone I can trust

(Transcript Int30)

In extract 7:6, I ask the participant to imagine who she would go to for help, posing a hypothetical scenario. P is asked to rule out the family and she selects 'my doctor'. When pushed to give reasons for the selection she states: 'I've known her for a long time' and later in the utterance 'she's someone I can trust'. P describes the doctor as 'my doctor' (not just any doctor), indicating a *personal* relationship (relationship history). She uses her knowledge of her past help-seeking encounters with her doctor to make a prediction about future help-seeking possibilities: 'I've been to her *before*' ... 'I *know* she would listen' (emphasis added). It is not the category concept 'doctor' that is criterial in selection work, rather selection of the 'doctor' is an accountable selection on the basis that she is known and that a positive helping response can be anticipated.

Whilst it is not possible to identify that all 'mothers' or all 'doctors' are generically relevant for help it is possible to conclude that where prior knowledge of a help-seeking/receiving relationship is available and suggestive of future help, then such categories are routinely treated as correct selections for help⁷⁹. For participants,

⁷⁹ See my comments in Chapter 5 concerning the difficulties of mapping 'insiders' or preferred sources of help onto category concepts in any determinate sense.

being able to anticipate a positive outcome of one's help-seeking efforts was rendered a central consideration in these research conversations.

Identifying some differences between collections 'I' and 'O': Family, friends, strangers and professionals.'

Close/trusted as routine inferences from 'family' and 'friends'

I have stated in previous chapters that the categories 'family' and 'friends' appear to be 'easily' selected for help in these research conversations. In order to further understand how this works it is important to note that whilst any category marked with the descriptors 'close' or 'trust' can stand as an accountable response in relation to questions about help-seeking, the device 'family' and the category 'friend' are in and of themselves suggestive of 'close' or 'trusted' relationships. For example, the categories 'mother' or 'sisters' can be suggested as sources of help without qualification as 'trusted' 'close' and so forth. This does not preclude that one might further qualify one's selections with these descriptors but rather, that this is not a necessity. In extract 7:2 above, suggestion of 'mother' and 'sisters' is made straight off and without the necessity of giving further or fuller explanation. The inference 'close relationship' is routinely made relevant by reference to the SRPs mother-daughter or sister-sister. Simply on the basis of the social organisation of incumbency of the SRP mother-daughter a 'close' relationship can be inferred.

Membership of the SRP mother-daughter provides for the routine inference 'close'/'trusted' relationship, unless otherwise indicated.

Returning to the extract 7:1, that the family are programmatically relevant for help renders accountable P's response and introduction of the category 'mother' ('there's only my mother'). That he has identified he has a mother and that 'close' is an inference of 'mother' renders accountable his further qualification: 'who I'm not massively close to'. Given that 'close' is an inference from 'mother' and 'close' is criterial of help in this instance, the absence of his mother as a source of help requires explanation. Extract 7:7 provides a further example:

Extract 7:7

R: Where do you think Jenny will seek help?

B: Family first of all I would say=

D: =definitely (A: yeah) her mum

A: Within the family circle=

C: =her mum, her sisters, she would talk to them first

(Transcript FG16)

In extract 7:7 that 'close' or 'trust' are inferences from categories of the device family, enables participants to simply state 'family' or 'her mum', without having to offer further qualification.

Given the observations made above regarding these descriptors and prediction, for any device where 'close'/'trusted'/'comfortable' and so forth are routine inferences, this renders the device a *strong* device in relation to questions about help-seeking. Coulter writing on presupposition states that 'we count on the addressee's knowing the presupposition of sentences' (cited in Psathas, 1979, p167). Any speaker or hearer knows, for example, that an utterance can be judged as

inappropriate or incorrect not only on the grounds that 'some state of affairs has been wrongly described, or wrongly assessed but equally on the grounds of presupposition failure' (in Psathas, 1979, p167). From these observations it is possible to claim that the ease with which participants select 'family' is indicative of an *expected consensus* around category selection. The helping predicates of the categories such as 'family' were routinely treated as category bound⁸⁰ for the practical purposes demanded by the focus groups or interviews, and participants rendered this a key relevance in situated decision-making. It is now possible to begin to draw some further contrasts between 'I' and 'O'.

'Outsiders' generate questions and queries regarding the provision of help

In contrast to those described as 'close' or 'trusted', in talk where participants co-produced and selected the category 'outsider', questions such as 'will that help?' or 'how will that help?' routinely followed. These questions generated by the selection of 'O', both followed and indicated that a candidate for 'O' had been selected. It is possible to conclude that these questions and queries were constitutive of 'O'. Calls to account for, or the seeking of further clarification of the helping predicates of 'O', served to demarcate 'O' from 'I'. In conversation where participants were pushed to consider 'outside' help or introduced 'outside' help, participants could routinely ask 'how will that help?' Helping predicates were not taken for granted; participants were unable to routinely anticipate positive outcomes of help-seeking efforts by 'O'.

⁸⁰ I have noted here participants' treatment of category-predicated activities *as* category-bound. This is an analytic observation I am not suggesting that helping predicates *are* category-bound. What I noted was the routine treatment of the helping predicates of family and friends or someone 'close'/'trusted' as category-bound, whereas in the case of 'outside' help, helping predicates were *generated* in situ.

Extract 7:8

1. **R:** Ok let's go on, who you think Jenny would turn to for help?
2. **B:** Err- looking beyond that, I'd say it's gone beyond – em - being friendly about it//
3. **A:** I don't think it's something you'd talk to your mum about=
4. **B:** =not if it's about Mike coming home like he has, it's got to be somebody
5. independent-.
6. **R:** Erm- what do you think? (to D)
7. **D:** Erm - I'm not sure –err - I don't condone it, I don't say that it's OK, but I just
8. wonder whether - it's happened once, do you sort of try and rectify what you see as being a
9. problem - this first time round, see if you can sort it out and hope that it doesn't happen
10. again -em- I'm not sure. I think unless you are in there, unless you really get a feel for
11. exactly what's going on, it's difficult to know. I mean I could be wrong, edging on the side
12. of caution - you could say perhaps they do need help, but you wouldn't like to feel that – err
13. - it could cause even more problems?
14. **R:** Going and asking for professional help could cause more problems?
15. **D:** yeah

(Transcript FG14)

Extract 7:8 is taken from a focus group at stage two of vignette. In this extract **B** responds to my question with: 'I'd say it's gone beyond em being friendly about it' (line 2). This sets the practical frame for the participants, who participate in **B**'s 'sequencing work' and are pushed then to consider a category selection that is adequate for the practical purposes of 'beyond being friendly'. **A** takes up the line of talk established by **B** and agrees, 'I don't think it's something you'd talk to your mum about ' (line3). The key observation I make here, relates to the response from **D** that follows (lines 7-14). **D**'s response to **B**'s category selection (somebody independent) raises a number of questions and queries and these include:

- *The frequency of the problem:* 'it's happened once, do you sort of try and rectify it...hope it doesn't happen again' (lines 8 - 9).
- *Certainty about 'assessment of 'the problem':* 'Unless you really get a feel for exactly what's going on' (line 10).

- *Implications of one's category selection* situatedly expressed as 'you wouldn't' like to feel that err, it could cause even more problems?' (lines 12-13).

In chapter 9 of this thesis I take up in some detail the relationship between *problem formation* and selection of help-provider. For present purposes, however, the point I make is that in contrast to extracts 7:1 - 7:7 above, where selection of 'insider' categories is routinely treated as 'sufficient' (there is an expectation of help as manifest in the absence of lines of elaboration) in extract 7:8 suggestion of 'someone independent' requires significant accounting work. In drawing analytic attention to participant D's overt monitoring of his selection work (lines 7-14) it is possible to further demarcate some key matters relating to the constituted boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' help. The selection of 'somebody independent' is marked as provisional with comments to the effect of 'mm and mm' 'not sure' and 'that could cause even more problems'. Helping predicates here are not taken for granted. Participant D raises questions and queries about suitability of 'somebody independent' suggesting that it may 'cause even more problems'. Thus, what the participants constitute in relation to this category selection are uncertainties, with some possibility of negative implications of 'somebody independent' getting involved.

From these extracts a consideration of responses to or outcomes of help-seeking efforts presents as a central accountable concern in decision-making. Thus, categories that generate *in situ*, the possibility of negative outcomes require further accounting work. The requirement of further accounting work is displayed in the raising of questions and queries.

Extract 7:9

1. R: So, tell me then, have you ever had professional help?
2. P: No, no, the only ways I've had it, is through the postnatal depression group, which I had
3. with K
4. R: So how did you get to go there?
5. P: By a friend, she had post-natal depression a year and a half before I had K and she was
6. actually still going to the group and she mentioned to Mrs X who worked there about me. –
7. And - erm- I had actually rang my friend that morning in tears and I said “I don't know
8. what's wrong with me” and he was only 3 months old (pointing to a photograph of a baby)
9. and she said I think you might have Post-natal depression- but I don't know. She said I'll
10. mention it to the people at the group. Then - because I had to actually ring them for the
11. group, Mrs X said she couldn't ring me - I found that hard
12. R: What was hard about that?
13. P: Just – err - I was really an emotional wreck that morning and actually to pick the phone
14. up to ring somebody that I didn't know. I found that really hard, I thought I don't know who
15. this person is, I don't know if they're going to. I was embarrassed because I don't cry very
16. much and I don't know what this person is going to think of me- if I'm an idiot do you
17. know what I mean? (R: yeah) But when she came to the house I felt really comfortable with
18. her, she was really nice – em - but other than that I've never had help. My doctor tried to
19. refer me to a counsellor to talk about problems but the waiting list was horrendous and by
20. the time I'd got the letter to go, I didn't feel like going and talking to anybody, I'd got over it
21. all.- I had to do that myself, so what was the point in going to someone then?

(Transcript Int 22)

In interview extract 7:9 P is recounting her anxiety about seeking help from a post-natal service; her anxiety rests on the fact that she *does not know* the person and in particular how the help provider will respond. She states ‘to pick the phone up to ring somebody that I didn't know. I found that really hard’ (lines 13-14). For her this is ‘hard’ because as she states : a) ‘I don't know who this person is (lines 14-15) and b) ‘I don't know what this person is going to think of me’ (line 16). On this occasion she is concerned about the possibility of looking ‘an idiot’ (line 16). She states, however, that when the helper came to her house she felt ‘comfortable’, but this was not something she could anticipate *prior to* the encounter with the potential helper. Whilst the participant's particular concerns are occasioned (looking ‘an idiot’), her concerns centre on a more generalised concern that arises from asking for help from someone that is not personally known and being unable to anticipate a response.

Extract 7:10

C: Yeah I went to the doctor at one point when I was so depressed and I walked in - I didn't know what I was going to say - and I just broke down in tears and they recommended a counsellor - now I did go to the counsellor, but you still feel that, that it's somebody you don't know-How much do I open up?- Are my children going to be taken away if I say there's so much problems?-How much can I say without it wrecking-.you know what I've got?

(Transcript Int 4)

In extract 7:10 again C's central concern is that the doctor has referred her to a counsellor but she doesn't *know* how the counsellor will respond. Will her children be taken away if she opens up too much? Her problem arises from the fact that this is someone she does not know. Unlike category selections that are 'close' or 'trusted' the category predicated helping activities of those *not known*, somebody 'outside' or 'independent', cannot be taken for granted in terms of assuring the outcomes or responses wanted. Selection of those who are *strangers* or where the category-predicated activities provide some doubt about 'helpfulness', generates questions, requests for reassurances, qualifications, warrant and the like and this stands in contrast to those 'inside' or 'close'/'trusted'.

In a number of conversations participants indicated that they had experienced good, 'close' relationships with professionals. However, upon the particular professional leaving the agency they were reluctant to seek or accept help from another representative of that agency. Given the principle of presumptive representativeness this seemed at first confusing, however, the central issue seemed to be 'starting again', 'getting to *know* someone else'. If 'trusted', 'close' and comfortable' relationships established in and through engagement with another meet the selection criteria for help, then when a worker leaves it does not mean that another worker can offer this 'qualification'. Thus, that the client does not want another worker does not

necessarily imply that the worker was not seen as a good advocate for the agency but rather, that the issue of representation of the occupational group was *not* criterial in decision-making. What was criterial was that the help-seeker had established a personal relationship of 'trust' in the particular worker. The end of that relationship did not necessarily prompt the service-user to return to another worker in the same agency because a new worker, despite membership of the same occupational group, would be qualitatively different given this selection criteria.

Extract 7:11

R: Will you still see your advisor at Connexions?

P: Kate?

R: yeah

P: Yes I think I will- yes- it's just err- that I like her and with her going I don't know If I want to talk to anyone else- you know, start again

R: Is it hard bringing it all up again?

P: She doesn't know all of it, like I said, only little bits of it, like I said, but I don't' want to start again with someone new, you know getting to know them

R: So now that K is going, you wouldn't go back to Connexions?

P: No, I wouldn't go back to Connexions and it's too far to walk- and I don't want some daft bird I don't know asking me a load of daft questions

(Transcript BPINT 6)

In extract 7:11 the young woman does not know if she wants to see anyone else when her connexions worker leaves the agency. She refers to 'start it up again'⁸¹ and the researcher shares in her understanding by offering, 'bringing it all up again'. The named worker Kate is contrasted with '*some* daft bird', '*she* doesn't *know*' (emphasis added). In professional relationships one can get to a point where one can predict desired outcomes of one's help-seeking efforts, but this is a process which entails uncertainty, until such a (close/trusted/comfortable) relationship is achieved.

⁸¹ There is something further in this extract to do with entitlements to know personal problems, which I take up further in chapter 8.

Knowledge of substantive activities: a key resource in consideration of professional (outside) help

It is possible to understand something further about how it is that participants appear to be so concerned with the outcomes of help-seeking efforts by exploring the resources participants use when considering professional help.

If prior knowledge is a key resource in decision-making (working together with the descriptors 'close', 'trust' and so forth) then this raises the question of how, when knowledge of a helping relationship history is not available, that participants can make decisions about sources of help. From this study when participants were asked to consider professional help and professionals were not personally known, participants considered *the work (substantive activities)* associated with those agencies.

Extract 7:12

R: So do you think they need outside help? - Child welfare agencies? - Should they get involved?

A: I'm not sure what they do - I haven't used them myself, but I think that they deal with more serious cases than this?

B: Yeah, like child abuse, you see it on the telly, don't you?

A: That's what I mean, they only get involved to deal with the more serious stuff, this doesn't seem to be at that stage yet

B: No and she's going to think - they might take your kids off you.

(Transcript FG4)

In extract 7:12 above the participants have been asked to consider whether the family need outside help. In considering outside help participant A indicates her lack of 'insider' knowledge of these agencies: 'I'm not sure what they do, I haven't used

them myself'. She knows something of the substantive activities of those agencies, however, and uses this to qualify her response 'I think they deal with more serious cases than this'. Her response is supported by the next utterance from **B** who proposes that they deal with 'child abuse'. In the final utterance **B** makes a further reference to the work of child welfare agencies 'they might take your kids off you'.

Extract 7:13

R: Do you think that they need help from child-welfare agencies?

A: I think that this is not serious enough for what they do - you know

B: No it's not at that stage yet, no

C: This isn't the sort of thing they'd get involved in

D: No – it's not a life and death situation, there's nothing horrendous going on which would require that sort of help

(Transcript FG25)

In extract 7:13 I ask participants to consider whether help from child-welfare agencies is needed. Participant **A** states that 'this is not serious enough for what they do'. Participant **C** further adds that 'this isn't the sort of thing they get involved with'. Participants consider what child-welfare agencies 'do' and by implication this is 'life and death' or 'horrendous' situations.

The here-and-now circumstances of the focus group and interviews made relevant the category 'child-welfare'. Participants were specifically asked to consider child-welfare agencies as a possible source of help. Participants focused on the substantive activities of child-welfare agencies as a resource in decision-making in the absence of 'insider' knowledge and this rendered what these agencies 'do' a central focus.

That the substantive activities routinely associated with child-welfare agencies were brought into focus in decision-making and that these were routinely constituted as negatively morally implicative raises significant issues for those who provide child-welfare support. I will discuss these issues further in the concluding chapter, however, for current purposes I will simply draw attention to participants' routine reference to possible negative outcomes of seeking help from professionals, in qualifying their rejection of this form of help. The following extract is illustrative:

Extract 7:14

R: Do you think they would approach a social worker?

A: No

B: No

C: No

D: No

R: Why not?

B: Because of the reputation of social work, and them getting high handed and then next you are getting your assets stripped.

R: which are your children?

B: yes your children

(FG19)

It is possible to conclude that that organisation of the substantive activities routinely associated with child welfare provides for invocations, such as in the above extract: 'getting your assets stripped'. Simply on the basis of the substantive activities that can be routinely inferred as associated with this category, help-seeking can be constituted as an activity that may make things worse (or result in undesirable outcomes, extracts 7:8 and 7:12). Given that a concern with positive outcomes of the help-seekers' requests is a central relevance in decision making then the conceptual grammar of the category child-welfare, routinely associated with the activity of 'having your kids taken off you', mediates against selection of this category.

For the participant who considers help with personal family problems to do with parenting of children, inter-subjective understandings about the possible negative consequences of seeking help from child welfare agencies were a routine consideration:

Extract 7:15

R: Should we involve the social?

B: Everyone should think carefully for a minute- here's a five minute problem, which I think personally is not too big and this will create a big future problem, even the loss of another Dad. Also involving the social- it will hurt the mother more, as it's her children not Mike's. Mike may not have the same feelings as Sabiha for the kids.

A: They will not involve the social for the fear of children being taken away

(Transcript FG24)

In the above extract participant **B** talks of a 'five minute' problem being turned into a 'big problem'; she talks of 'loss' and 'hurt'. The mother will be 'hurt' more, by involving 'the social'. Clearly words such as hurt or loss are antithetical to help, but are inferences of 'the social'. Hurt and loss turn on the organisation of conventional knowledge about what the 'social' (can) do. There is something further, however, and of considerable import which is observable from the research materials.

Participants routinely indicated that social services, the social or child-welfare agencies were not helpful and spelt out particular negative consequences of seeking help from them, to do with 'having your kids taken off you', 'being watched over' and so forth. In addition, however, participants could select and deploy such categories to invoke negative implications *without* explicitly stating what those

negative implications were. Simply on the basis of invoking category incumbency (stating social services) a negative context could be implied:

Extract 7:16

1. But if somebody knocked on the door now, it's not going to go forward is
2. it? - I don't think it would, I think it would make the situation rise
3. R: It wouldn't go forward?
4. A: No, exactly, I think if somebody knocked on the door=
5. D:=Excuse me I'm from social services, what have you?//
6. A: that's not supporting them.
7. D: He seems - although he seems bossy - he seems - err - in a vulnerable situation to
8. me, and parenting is a skill and you can't just be thrown in - erm - the deep end
9. C: Yeah, I agree totally with you there
10. B: I would just be worried if this happened again and he said sorry again, then you
11. would think//
12. A: Yeah but it doesn't say that though does it?
13. B: No I'm just saying, at the bottom, where he says he's very sorry, that sort of rang -
14. erm - //
15. C: Well that's where you need to have that discussion and not just let this plod on,
16. because you will have the same problems later,- so you do need to take some kind of
17. proactive approach
18. A: I mean he could be truly, really sorry, couldn't he? (C:He could be yeah), but I love
19. you and all this family, lets get together and sort all this out//
20. B: But they do get belted, and they say that all the time don't they? - I mean "I'm really
21. sorry and I won't do it again" and here's another one (throws a punch) -
22. C: That's it, that's it, but we don't know enough
23. A: So what are we saying people don't deserve a second chance?

(Transcript FG 12)

In extract 7:16 A states that 'if somebody knocked on the door now, it's not going to go forward' (line 1). A neither states *how* it is not going to go forward, or *who* is knocking on the door. D, however, is able to connect her utterance to A's and add to A's statement by saying: 'excuse me I'm from social services' (line 5). A takes the next turn in talk and adds: 'that's not supporting them' (line 6). Here is an example of a co-produced utterance which relies on participants' inter-subjective conventional knowledge of a) which category knocks on the door and b) routine inferences about 'social services'. Simply invoking category incumbency is enough to provide for agreement (as observable/accountable) that this source would not help and also provides for the sense of the comment from A 'don't' they deserve a

second chance?’(line 20). A’s question is final and closes the topic; it’s sense rests on ‘what everyone knows’ about the powers of social services as discussed above.

That the substantive activities associated with child welfare can provide for routine negative moral implications is of some considerable practical import particularly as knowledge of the substantive activities is a central resource in decision-making. This is a very simple observation but as Sacks writes:

‘it can be simply stated, that the fact of inferential adequacy of membership categories is a major one as regards the organisation of member’s knowledge and the workings of a culture- (Sacks, 1966, p42)

The difficulty for child-welfare agencies or agencies situatedly associated with the work of ‘knocking on the door’ or ‘not giving a second chance’ is that a negative moral context is invoked, simply on the basis of naming the ‘social’ or invoking category incumbency. It is not necessary to say that they are incompetent or bad; rather, on the basis of the organisation of substantive activities alone categories such as ‘the social’ or ‘social services’ can be used as *a priori* negatively morally implicative. Simply on the basis of *the legitimated activities* associated with ‘the social’ , the substantive activities provide for negative moral implications.

Discussion

The demands of the focus group or interview required that participants produce an accountable/correct category selection in relation to questions or debates about help-seeking. Participants were charged with the production of a 'sufficient account' and the key to producing a sufficient account is knowledge of the latitude for agreement or disagreement in relation to category selection (Pollner, 1987). It is from observation of participants' use and deployment of this knowledge that one then gets to the *inferential adequacy* of category concepts regarding the provision of help. Where the descriptors 'close', 'trusted' or 'comfortable' were deployed category selections were made 'straight off' and without calls to account. In contrast, where situatedly designated 'outsiders' were considered participants oriented to the reflexivities of talk. In the case of an 'outsider' participants displayed overt reciprocal monitoring of utterance presuppositions with attention drawn to selecting and accounting work. From these observations it is possible to conclude that relationships described as 'close', 'trusted' or 'comfortable' are criterial for help with family problems.

Family and friends are relational pairs who stand in a *personal relationship* to each other. The relationship is *criterial of incumbency*. It can be conventionally imputed, for example, that a mother has a 'close' relationship with her daughter, unless otherwise indicated. 'Close' relationships of family and friends allow the helping predicates to be routinely treated as category-bound. 'Insider' relationships stand as the referent or standard in decision-making (chapter 5). Whilst it is not possible to directly generalise from this study to the position of 'real-world' professionals, one

might speculate that the position of those ‘outside’ needs to be considered in relation to those ‘inside’, who are ‘close’, ‘trusted’ and so forth. Professionals are frequently not known to service users prior to referral; this is particularly so in the case of targeted services. Whilst the social actor might know what a professional does in terms of work, this study suggests that this kind of decision-making resource is a very different resource from prior knowledge gained in and through ‘insider’ helping relationships.

A number of theorists have commented on the difficulty of theorising ‘trust’ (Kramer and Tyler 1996; Mistzal, 2001; Gambetta, 1988; Baier, 1986). In this study social actors gloss relationships which meet the criteria for help with the descriptors ‘close’ or ‘trusted’, however, from detailed examination of talk in interaction it is possible to speculate on how trust might work in helping relationships. This study suggests that ‘Trust’ is a reflexive achievement, achieved (again and again) as an occasioned matter, demonstrated in this study through such statements as ‘I know how they will react’, ‘you can rely on her’ and the like. It is possible to speculate that ‘trust’ is occasioned, it is never subject to rules and categorisation for all time. From this study, findings suggest that individuals select ‘trust’ relationships on the basis of enactment of those relationships as ‘trusted’ on each and every occasion of requests for help. Again the findings from this study are necessarily limited to the particular context of research conversations, however, ‘trust’ and how ‘trust’ works in professional-service user relationships is certainly an avenue of enquiry for further research.

It is possible to speculate that, for the professional there is a point *prior to* establishing a relationship and at this point the professional can be considered a stranger. In this study, in relation to the category stranger it is not so 'easy' to treat the helping predicates as category-bound, some generation work is required. Thus, in the case of the SRP stranger-stranger it is difficult to anticipate the outcomes of one's (hypothetical) help-seeking efforts. Child-welfare agencies when they are not known are 'strangers', in addition, the substantive activities routinely associated with this category appear to compound the difficulties they already face on the account of not being known. In chapter 6 I stated that participants made clear that seeking help for family problems that impact on the care of children was routinely and from the outset negatively morally. In this chapter I have developed this claim and illustrated how the substantive activities routinely associated with child welfare agencies (such as knocking at the door, not giving a second chance and taking your kids), allow this category to be used as *a priori* negatively morally implicative.

Several authors have attempted to theorise 'trust' and have considered where 'trust' becomes relevant in social relationships. This study suggest that what these authors all miss, is the reflexive achievement of 'trust', the observation from Luhman (1979, 1988) that 'trust' is a solution for specific problems of risks is relevant. Similarly, Sztompka (1999) has stated that where there are risks then 'trust' becomes relevant. This study suggests that the substantive activities routinely associated with child-welfare agencies appear to increase the 'risks' already associated with seeking help. If, as Luhman (1979) suggests, 'trust' becomes programmatic in situations of 'risk', then this raises the question of whether the very possibility of professionals 'taking your kids off you' necessitates the careful selection of 'trust' relationships. If there is

a possibility that a problem can get into the ‘wrong hands’ then this necessitates that problems are kept to a restricted and ‘trusted’, ‘insider’ audience (chapter 6).

Stompka (1999) has described ‘trust relationships’ as providing a theory about the future. From this study it is possible to speculate that if an individual stands in a ‘close’/‘trusted’ relationship with either another family member or friend, then he/she has a theory of how that individual will behave in terms of the provision of help. The social actor uses this knowledge as a key resource in decision-making. In the case of the category ‘outsider’, either an absence of a relationship history or a history which is not predictive of help, may offer no such assurances. I take up these points in the conclusion to this thesis, where I raise questions for further research and discuss policy implications.

Chapter 8

Identifying further inferential frameworks in decision-making:

Symmetry/Asymmetry and SRPs

Introduction

In the previous chapter I identified that categories described as ‘close’/‘trusted’/‘comfortable’ were routinely treated as inferentially adequate regarding the provision of help. I concluded that these descriptors had some significant interactional relevance in situated decision-making and illustrated how these descriptors functioned reflexively with the resource ‘prior knowledge’. I illustrated how relationships qualified by the descriptors ‘close’/‘comfortable’/‘trusted’ assisted co-conversationists to anticipate outcomes of help-seeking efforts, with prediction work displayed as having some central relevance in situated decision-making. In this chapter I will focus on participants’ knowledge and understandings of standardised-relational pairs (SRPs) in terms of symmetry and asymmetry and identify further resources in action. Focusing on the inferential work arising from participants’ use of knowledge about symmetry and asymmetry in SRPs, I will then describe *how* ‘insider’ relationships are occasioned so as to provide for their routine preference and selection in decision-making in response to the topic ‘help-seeking’.

In this chapter I make the following claims:

- Participants' selections of preferred SRPs are constituted as symmetrically organised in terms of (i) passing on of information (ii) perceptual and interpretive symmetry.
- Participants co-produce an 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective and this is rendered a central relevance in decision-making.
- Participants understand that the formulation of problems is relative and constitute preferred SRPs as those who share in symmetrical accountabilities regarding problem formulation.

Symmetric and asymmetric SRPs

There is a body of literature concerned with how SRPs can routinely be considered organised in terms of symmetry and asymmetry (Coulter, 1975; Pollner, 1974, Jayussi, 1984, Ten Have, 1991; Maynard, 1991). This body of literature is useful because it stimulates thinking about the inferential tools which social actors use and routinely display in *differentiating* between different kinds of relationships. Throughout this thesis I have emphasised the centrality of participants' *demarcation* work arising from situated orientation to, and constitution of, *difference*. Participants frequently juxtaposed one kind of SRP against another in selection work. A number of authors have suggested that an understanding of symmetry and asymmetry is *central* to social actors' knowledge of how relationships work. Social actors use this knowledge in contingent and flexible ways to constitute differences between SRPs in terms of 'rules of conduct', and so forth (Jayyusi, 1984). In this chapter, whilst I start from the position that whether a relationship is constituted as

symmetrical/asymmetrical is always an occasioned matter, use of this inferential apparatus is a central resource for participants in decision-making.

Jayyusi (1984) offers a description of the difference between SRPs constituted as symmetric and those constituted as asymmetric. She states that the SRPs friend-friend, husband-wife⁸², and so forth can routinely be considered/constituted as symmetrical; that is, obligations are inferred as to each other and *reciprocally* organised. In contrast, SRPs such as officer-client, doctor-patient, teacher-student and so forth, are routinely treated as asymmetric in terms of the *contrastive* organisation of rights/duties/entitlements. Jayyusi (1984) offers the following description:

‘Asymmetric categorisations involve two actual or candidate category incumbents, one to fit each pair part of the set and the asymmetry pertains to the relationship between them and describes the contrastive organisation of rights/duties and or knowledge and skills as between them...’ (Jayyusi , p122, 1984).

Ten Have (1991) studied doctor-patient relationships and argued that understanding that doctor-patient relationships are (normatively) asymmetric enabled social actors to understand and enact roles of doctor and patient. He identified two aspects of asymmetry routinely enacted in this SRP which centred on (i) asymmetry of topic,

⁸² Any social actor might describe his/her relationship with his/her spouse, for example, as ‘unequal’ or ‘all give and no take’, i.e. not symmetrical. However, this would be routinely formulated as a complaint. That relationships, such as that of spouses provide for routine expectations about mutual and reciprocal obligations (symmetry) means that where such obligations are breached, this provides for a complaint, disagreement or comment on the breach.

and (ii) asymmetry of initiative. In terms of asymmetry of topic, the patient's tasks mainly involved reporting their symptoms, answering questions and accepting physicians' decisions. For the doctor, listening to complaints, investigating cases and deciding on diagnosis and treatment were the doctor-relevant tasks (1991, p140). Interactional dominance in terms of the doctor's control over the doctor-patient relationship was seen as enacted through questioning on the part of the doctor, 'coupled with submission' on the part of the patient (p140). From this example it is possible to understand how social actors might use this inferential apparatus and routinely consider that doctor-patient relationships are differently organised from the symmetrical relationships of, for example, 'friends'. A friend, unlike the patient, can routinely make enquiries into another friend's health and vice versa; mutuality or reciprocation characterises the relationship.

From analysis of the research materials and focusing on the deployment of the inferential apparatus to do with symmetry and asymmetry, it is possible to say something *further* about how preferred relationships ('close', 'trusted' 'comfortable') are constituted in talk. I observed that where a relationship was constituted as *symmetrical*, these relationships were preferred. The symmetrical organisation of helping relationships was occasioned as centrally relevant in situated and provided some expectations about outcomes of help-seeking efforts.

Preference for symmetric relationships as sources of help

Across data sets, in selecting preferred sources of help, participants frequently qualified their selections with reference to the symmetrical organisation of the SRP.

Participants made clear that the symmetrical organisation of these relationships was criterial in making correct category selections.

Extract 8:1

C: I think that you will go to your own family first because you have that firm belief that your family is going to think about you first. An outsider is not going to think of you first. They are going to look at the situation and they may not believe you. They just might not - just might not believe you and think that's wrong. But your family are going to try to make the situation better for you, putting you and your children first and - there's no risk of taking your children away.

(Transcript FG18)

In 8:1 above C selects her family as a preferred source of support. She invokes the generality of her selection by referring to '*your own family*' (emphasis added). Her selection is qualified by invoking 'what anyone knows' (you), that obligations between immediate family members are to each other 'first' ('Your family is going to put you first'). She draws a contrast between family and the obligations of 'an outsider' who is not going to think of you first, but 'the situation'. Obligations between family members are defined in situ as to *each other (symmetric)*. This contrasts with the asymmetric relationships between 'outsiders', where other considerations come into play in terms of obligations - in this instance, 'the situation'.

Extract 8:2

A: Yeah, she needs to - she needs to be able to build up a social life for herself again, and go through the processes of finding herself - meeting people, finding the confidence to go out. I mean, she's probably so grateful that somebody's come along and taken some notice of her=

B:= yeah, recognising that she's feeling vulnerable.

A: I mean, how many? I mean, I mean, even the loveliest of people they're not going to err - have strings of people queuing up, offering to look after them//

B: One good turn deserves another, I think when you do something for someone else, that's a good basis for getting a good relationship going.

(Transcript FG 19)

In extract 8:2 above, participants have been asked to think about the kinds of support that Jenny, the fictitious character in the vignette, might need or consider. The exchange opens with the participants suggesting that Jenny needs friends, 'she needs to build up a social life for herself'. As the exchange progresses, B defines 'a good relationship' as one in which 'one good turn deserves another'. Her description invokes a symmetrically organised relationship characterised by reciprocal obligations.

Extract 8:3

1. R: Can I just ask you one more question. Round here - what services - do you think women
2. need more support locally? - And what do you think that they would need? Have you heard
3. of any of the new initiatives like those in X town at all?
4. C: Maybe not so much like going to see someone like a counsellor, because that does make
5. you feel like there is something wrong with you in a way//
6. A: It just brings it out, though, that it's not something to be embarrassed about.
7. B: I'd rather talk to a counsellor than a social worker because a counsellor isn't going to sit
8. there and make notes on me, and go into me background, whereas a social worker
9. unfortunately, is going to have to keep a file on, you aren't they? They have to, I wouldn't
10. want that. I wouldn't want it - written down.
11. C: I think somewhere where you are all the same; people are the same as you, everyone
12. together=
13. B: =Yeah, where you can all say I have had a rotten time this week
14. C: You know you are not just talking to someone, one on one, where you think they don't
15. have a clue what I am on about.
16. B: That's right/
17. C: And you've got people there=
18. B: =yeah you've got people there, in your situation, rather than some expert coming in and
19. telling you what to do.

(Transcript FG1)

In this extract, participants have been pushed by the researcher to imagine what local services might be helpful. Participants name counsellors and social workers, and there is some debate about the usefulness of either of these services. Participant C suggests, 'somewhere where you are all the same', 'everyone together' (line 11). This suggestion is supported by B, who states that 'where you can all say, I've had a rotten time this week' (line 12). C juxtaposes a description of symmetric

relationships of ‘people who are in the same situation’ with a description of the asymmetric relationship client-expert (lines 11 to 14). In contrast to ‘people’ who are ‘the same’, the expert comes in ‘telling you what to do’ and doesn’t have ‘a clue what I am on about’.

Clearly how relationships are seen as symmetrical or asymmetrical is an occasioned matter and infinitely regressible. However, it is possible to identify two particular dimensions of symmetry/asymmetry which participants routinely made relevant when selecting sources of support:

1. Symmetry and asymmetry of obligations regarding telling/passing on information.
2. Symmetry and asymmetry of interpretation and perception.

These particular dimensions of symmetry and asymmetry have been separated out for analytic purposes, but, as this chapter will illustrate, practical reasoning presents as a complex nesting of inferential work. These two aspects of symmetry/asymmetry are constituted in participants’ descriptions as connected in important ways. In addition, that participants render these two aspects of symmetry/asymmetry as relevant, needs to be understood in the context of the reflexive relationship between category incumbency and formulation of the problem⁸³.

⁸³ I expand on this displayed relationship later in this chapter. Chapter 9 is devoted to a consideration of where ‘the problem’ fits in decision-making. In chapter 9, I consider the reflexive relationship between the situated constitution of ‘a problem’ and choice of category of help-provider.

Symmetry and asymmetry of obligations regarding 'telling' / 'knowing'

'Only real close family would find out'

From my analysis of data sets, it became clear that issues to do with 'telling' or 'passing on information' were given some centrality in terms of decisions about help and family problems. Participants frequently qualified preferred choices for help on the basis of descriptions of help-providers as those who would not 'tell' or 'spread the problem around'. It is possible to approach this relevance by focusing on participants' deployment of inferential frameworks to do with symmetry, asymmetry and SRPs.

In the following short extract the participants are debating where the fictitious characters in the vignette would seek help:

Extract 8:4

1. C: Only real close family would find out, they'd be so worried about it getting out. If it
2. got out people would start making a lot out of it. The truth gets lost in the lies, doesn't it?
3. So a lot of lies are spread and - and the truth is dissolved really, isn't it? You don't really
4. want people to know much about it. It's really difficult to keep it within, even if you just
5. tell one person, it can get out and then there's no coming back after that (A: yeah, it's
6. out)//
7. B: Even I would say even before you go to the Muslim forum, couples would try to
8. resolve it themselves//
9. A: It's always immediate family.
10. R: This is one of the things I have picked up from the Muslim forum. Even then they
11. said there's a need to trust, they would need to trust and be sure that the person, even if
12. the person is a professional//
13. C: Professional people are no good, they just think that professional people are out there
14. to do their job. They're not out there to look after our feelings, our interests, they're there to

15. do their job, they're going to do a job, and their job might mean that they have to let half
16. of town X know about it, so they're only going to trust immediate family. Your mum is
17. not going to tell anybody and you know that, that's it.

(Transcript FG18)

Drawing on the analysis I have developed in the previous chapters it is possible to observe across this short extract that:

1. A distinction is drawn between 'real close family and 'people' (line1).
2. This distinction serves to collect together those situatedly 'within' (collection 'I') and those who are 'outside' (line 4).
3. As the exchange progresses, those 'outside' (not considered the first port of call) are 'people', the 'Muslim Forum' , 'professional people' and these are differentiated from 'close' or 'immediate' family and 'your mum'.
4. Those 'within' are clearly constituted as preferred as sources of help - 'it's only 'immediate/close family' that would find out.
5. Those on the 'inside' are rendered inferentially adequate regarding the provision of help; those on the 'outside' are not.

In terms of identifying how those within the 'family' are differentiated from those 'outside', participants make relevant concern about the organisation of obligations regarding 'telling'/'finding out'. A key concern is constituted as family problems '*getting out*'. Participants are worried about family problems getting '*spread around*'. They constitute the categories 'immediate family', 'real close family', or 'your mum', as preferred sources of help and these are juxtaposed with 'people' and 'professionals' on the basis of 'telling'. Participants' selection and constitution of 'insider' resources is based on a desire to limit the 'spread' of knowledge about the

problem to those who can be trusted *not* to tell - only 'immediate family would find out'. In considering how it is that this differentiation between professionals and people is achieved, it is useful to focus on the final utterance from C – 'your mum is not going to tell anybody and you know that'. Commencing from the analytic focus of MCA, attention is drawn to the following:

1. 1 This statement is made by C as a 'factive' ('your mother *is* not going to tell, emphasis added').
2. This statement invokes generality, '*your*' mother, '*you* know that' (emphasis added).
3. In invoking generality, C invites co-participants to share in both her inferential framework (drawing on conventional knowledge of SRPS and symmetry/asymmetry) and the 'validity' of her claim.
4. This statement is sequentially linked to and builds on earlier contrastive work from C who contrasts, 'people' with 'real close family'.

That C can make this statement and that co-participants share in her factive statement both indicate that participants consent to and share in the relevance of the *inferential apparatus* used by C on this occasion. It is co-orientation to this inferential apparatus that provides for the inter-subjective sense of C's claim about her mother.

The resources that C is using to render accountable her statement can be explicated via a focus on membership categorisation and, in particular, *mutually*⁸⁴ *understood* and rendered relevant cultural knowledge about the contrastive organisation of the rights and duties between the SRPs, ‘professional-client’, ‘people-people’, versus ‘immediate family’ or ‘mother-daughter’. In this instance, symmetry and asymmetry relate specifically to participants’ knowledge about how relationships are differently organised regarding the telling and passing on of information. Whereas ‘professionals’ are routinely considered accountable to or responsible to a potentially large number of sources (‘half of town X’) and similarly ‘people’, this stands in contrast to the obligations between ‘real close family’ where obligations/rights/duties are routinely considered as to each other. Contrastive obligations are constituted, in the case of family, as symmetrical obligations to a *finite* set, and contributes to the definition of those treated as family. In contrast, in the case of ‘professionals’ or ‘people’, obligations are constituted as asymmetrical and to a potentially *infinite* set.

Preferred ‘I’ keeps ‘the problem’ to a socially sanctioned and restricted audience

It is possible to take these observations further and unpack how the contrasts that C draws out between her people/professionals and ‘real close/immediate family’ (her mother) in extract 8:4 work. In the previous chapters I have stated that participants participated in ‘ordering work’ and displayed an inter-subjective understanding that there are preferred and dis-preferred audiences for sharing/hearing family problems.

⁸⁴ In her use of ‘you know that’ S invokes the generality of her claim; it is not just that she knows that obligations between professionals and service users are differently organised than immediate family - but it is something she can state as normative and generally understood.

For C, her mother is a preferred resource because she can anticipate that her mother will similarly draw a boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in sharing the problem. Thus, she emphatically states that her mother will not tell anybody (see my observations chapter 6 regarding somebody/anybody).

Participants deploy conventional ‘cultural’ knowledge about category concepts in order to achieve the demands of the practical task in hand. Clearly, for participants a key relevance arises from their conventional knowledge that child-welfare professionals are tied into reporting systems, with duties to pass on information – ‘it can get out’ (to the outside/outside). From the observations I have made in previous chapters this can routinely be constituted as a breach of a socially sanctioned moral order regarding the sharing of family problems. In extract 8:4, the category ‘people’ are dis-preferred on the basis that they are constituted as having no specific obligations to keep information to a selected (insider) audience. Thus, it is possible, via an examination of participants’ knowledge, to begin to further detail how ‘insider’ relationships are constituted so as to provide for their preference. I propose that those described as close/trusted are, on the basis of inferred symmetrical organisation of obligations to each other, assumed to keep the problem ‘inside’ and that this is a very central relevance in decision-making.

Extract 8:5

R: What about Mike? Is he going to go anywhere for help?

A: I think Mike would probably go for the same type of person, somebody that he can trust. - It might be his best mate. It might be his father. It might be his mother.

R: It might be his mother?

A: Err - somebody again who he knows it isn’t going to go any further with//

B: It doesn’t say whether Mike’s close to family or not, does it? Because if he’s not close to family then he wouldn’t have any body to go to.

(Transcript FG14)

In extract 8:5, participants make clear that there are a number of possible sources of help for Mike. These are not just any resources, however, they are those who are described as ‘close or trusted’. From A’s utterance it is also possible to further delimit ‘close/ trusted’ and state that ‘somebody who he knows it isn’t going to go any further with’ fits the criteria.

Extract 8:6

1. B: Or she’d go to her neighbour//
2. D: You’d go to your neighbour or your friend//
3. E: Your neighbour? But you would never actually go specifically and approach them,
4. I wouldn’t any way, I don’t know about anyone else - I would never actually go and
5. physically approach them//
6. A: It depends on how well you know the people as well though. Because you
7. wouldn’t like - I’ve come down, I’ve come down here, or I’d have gone to Clare or
8. Katie. But I wouldn’t have gone to anybody else about anything, because you don’t
9. know what other people are going to be like
10. C: I wouldn’t.
11. F: I’m a talker. I would have gone mental if I hadn’t have talked to anybody that
12. would listen//
13. A: Yeah, but if you went to her over there, or her there, and say something - they may
14. take it upon themselves to take it to social services and then say right, OK, then “I’ve
15. had this woman on my doorstep crying because her boyfriend’s beating her kids up”//
16. C: That’s what I mean, would you have gone to somebody? (E: Who you don’t really
17. trust?) No//
18. A: Or somebody official like (E: Social services) ?
19. B: I would have turned to my neighbours=
20. C: =Anybody like neighbours friends//
21. B: Somebody close by that would talk to you

(Transcript FG3)

In extract 8:6 above, the participants are debating where Jenny will seek help. The descriptors ‘close’ and ‘trusted’ are criterial in selection work and participants particularise ‘trust’ in terms of who can be ‘trusted’ with *information*. They debate the usefulness of neighbours, with some participants selecting neighbours as a suitable source and others participants pointing out that it is not just *any* neighbour that can be considered as a source of help. The criteria for help, cannot be finitely

specified at the level of category concept (not all neighbours), but rather it depends on how well you know the people (line 6). Those who are constituted as trusted with information are identified from the large category of '*neighbours*'. The sense of what defines 'trust' in this extract is evident in utterances from C and D; a sub-set of individuals are not to be considered because 'they may take it upon themselves to take it to social services' (line 14) or 'somebody 'official' (line 18). The sub-set of neighbours who are not preferred are constituted *in situ* as having asymmetric obligations regarding passing on information. They are not to be selected as a source of help because they may pass the information on to a source that is not sanctioned by the help-seeker. By implication, those who are selected are not going to do that.

Extract 8:7

1. B: I think that Jenny's got to go and do something - err- to ask for help – err - whether it's from
2. her sister or - erm - her sister might advise her, mightn't she?
3. R: What do you think her preference would be here? - Do you think it would be to keep it
4. within the family?
5. D: Yeah=
6. B: yeah, as much as she could, keep it quiet – it's personal isn't it?
7. A: She's probably a little embarrassed about it, especially if the teacher's already got
8. involved. She'll want to keep it in a close-knit community like the family and not extend it
9. out, so that it gets too much -and then it'll get blown out of proportion -
10. R: She thinks it'll get blown out of proportion? Mm. - By?
11. A: If social services or anybody that's an onlooker, rather than the family that's actually
12. seen
13. it happen-
13. R: So, - is there something about it, it feels safer to keep it in the family?
14. D: Yeah, definitely.

(Transcript FG5)

In extract 8:7, co-participants share in an understanding of a preferred audience for help-seeking. Again a boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family is achieved and made relevant specifically with respect to passing on information. A says, 'she'll want to keep it *in* a close-knit community' and not extend it *out* (line 8,

emphasis added). Her selection of the family rests on an assumption that the family will not 'extend it out'. From these observations it is possible to conclude that 'family' are selected because it can be routinely assumed that obligations are to each other and this extends to the passing on of information (which is routinely considered the preserve of a restricted audience). On the basis that the family are constituted as 'keeping it in', that is they respect a socially sanctioned boundary between those 'inside' and 'outside', family are a source of help.

In some instances, as discussed in chapter 6, participants cannot find help 'inside' and make a decision that 'outside' help is needed. However, when an outsider relationship is selected (constituted), participants make relevant similar considerations regarding the passing on or spread of information.

Extract 8:8

R: If you were going to go and seek professional help, what would be important to you in terms of the help you were going to get?

P: Getting it quickly, speak to someone very quickly, and it was confidential and - and - that they listened to you

R: And what do you mean by confidential?

P: That the feeling that you were just dealing with one person and that you didn't feel that a file was being kept on you and - em - that it was being passed on to lots of different organisations, and you didn't feel that we were being referred to lots of different groups of people - that you just went to one.

(Transcript Int 12)

In extract 8:8, the participant has been asked what would be important for him if he was going to seek professional help. A key issue for the interview participant was that 'it was confidential'. P elaborates by stating that he wants to feel that he was just dealing with one person, not that his problems are being passed on to a lot of different organisations. Thus P in considering an 'outsider' relationship also makes relevant symmetric obligations regarding the passing on of information

(confidentiality). The person he seeks help from is not going to refer him to lots of 'different groups of people'. Again, in relation to professional help, the interview participant makes relevant his concern that problems are for selected and restricted audiences. He might select a source of help from 'outside', but this does not mean he sanctions the selected source taking the problem to further 'outsiders'.

Extract 8:9

1. D: I'd go to the doctor
2. C: Yeah
3. R: The doctor?
4. D: Possibly, because I would feel if I could confide in him, then he would point
5. me in the right direction
6. R: Do you think the doctor? - If it was you? (turning to B)
7. B: I think something like that; you wouldn't go to friends or anything because
8. they would start thinking what is he like?
9. C: I think you would need to look for impartial advice, I suppose the doctor sort of
10. comes to mind/
11. C: Yeah not related to authority//
12. R: Not related to authority?
13. C: No, not as such, although your doctor is - err. -. you know impartial as far as
14. anything you tell him is in confidence
15. R: Yeah
16. C: If you told the local bobby who lived down the road, then he might go and
17. report you or something like that
18. R: But the doctor feels like a safe place?
19. C: Yeah.

(Transcript FG15)

In extract 8:9, the participant contrasts the 'doctor'- whom he can confide in and speak to in confidence, with the 'bobby' who might report (lines 16-17). Although there is some hesitancy in the notion that the 'doctor' is not related to 'authority', he is still differentiated *in situ* from the 'bobby', in that what you tell him 'is in confidence' (line 14).

It is possible to draw together the observations made in this chapter with the claims I have made in chapters 5 and 6. Participants display a reflexive relationship between

telling and knowing in decision-making; one is implicative of the other⁸⁵. When a participant made relevant an issue regarding 'telling', this also invoked the related concern to do with 'who can know' family problems. In extract 8:1 above, concerns about 'problems' getting spread around are to do with 'who' *should* find out and, as I discussed in chapters 5 and 6, participants' ordering work constitutes normative considerations regarding socially sanctioned audiences for family problems. I have stated that seeking help presents as *normatively and morally ordered*. From this chapter, it is relationships occasioned *in situ* that provide for expectations regarding 'keeping the problem in'. Where obligations are organised around and respect the boundary between inside and outside the family, they are treated as inferentially adequate regarding the provision of help.

Perceptual and interpretive asymmetry

'Truth gets lost in lies'

Returning initially to extract 8:4 discussed in the opening sections of this chapter, not only do participants constitute a concern about knowing and telling, but they constitute a further related concern which is that 'truth gets lost in the lies'. Across data sets, participants could recognisably invoke (observably and accountably) concerns about how others formulate problems *differently*. In extract 8:4, C opens the extract by stating that if 'it' got out then 'people would start making a lot out of it' (lines 1-2). In this utterance C ties her proposition to the category 'people'. In this

⁸⁵ Telling and knowing can operate as a standardised relational pair - one implies the other.

instance 'people' are suggested as formulating the problem differently from the hypothetical individual with the problem. In doing so, C is occasioning asymmetry when the category 'people' get involved in the work of formulating the problem. In addition and of central importance, C is suggesting that those 'outside' have the potential to *misperceive* and co-produce the problem 'wrongly'- (truth gets lost in lies). From an analysis of extract 8:4 is it possible to conclude that:

- Participants constitute different social actors as formulating problems differently (problem formulation is situated).
- That problem formulation is situated, is routinely rendered a central relevance in demarcation of preferred from dis-preferred sources of help.
- Participants have resources at hand which enable them to a) hold that problems are situatedly formulated, but at the same time b) systematically and routinely constitute preferred sources of help.

Across data sets, it is possible to discern that a further central accountable property of decision-making is to distinguish between those who can be considered as sharing a similar (accurate) perception of the problem and those who may misperceive the problem. Understanding (the problem) is presented as a key consideration. Participants indicate that shared/mutual understandings are preferable and are programmatic. The key question arising from analysis of extract 8:4 is, how is it that participants can achieve a distinction between those with special privilege to understand/see the problem in the same way (as it should be seen), from those who may see the problem differently or misperceive the problem? There are a number of

resources deployed by participants which enable them achieve *in situ* such distinctions.

Co-producing 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives: Experience and entitlements to know

Returning to 8:7 (page), participants draw a boundary between keeping 'it within' the family (line 3) and not extending the problem out (line 8). They co-construct this boundary on the basis that 'social services or anyone that's an onlooker' might blow it out of proportion and this collectivity (anyone that's an onlooker, line 11) is distinguished from 'family that's actually seen it happen'. In this extract onlookers are seen as having the potential to see the problem differently and further to 'blow the problem out of proportion'. In contrast family ('that's actually seen it happen'), by implication, are positioned as having more direct apprehension or special privilege to understand the problem (accurately). Thus a boundary is achieved on the basis of an *in situ* co-produced binary, 'onlooker/someone who has seen it happen'.

A further extract is illustrative:

Extract 8:10

D: Erm – I'm not sure - err - I don't condone it, I don't say that it's OK, but I just wonder whether - it's happened once, do you sort of try and rectify what you see as being a problem - this first time round, see if you can sort it out and hope that it doesn't happen again -erm- I'm not sure. I think unless you are in there, unless you really get a feel for exactly what's going on, it's difficult to know. I mean I could be wrong, edging on the side of caution - you could say perhaps they do need help, but you wouldn't like to feel that - err - it could cause even more problems?

R: Going and asking for professional help could cause more problems?

D: Yeah.

(Transcript FG14)

In extract 8:10, **D** is engaged in the business of formulating the problem in order to make a correct decision about whether the family in this instance need professional help. **D** considers that in his formulating he could be wrong; 'I'm not sure', 'I could be wrong, edging on the side of caution'. He draws a distinction between someone who was there, who really knows what's going on ('unless you are there, unless you really get a feel for what's going on, it's difficult to know') and himself, who as a member of a focus group, is outside of the problem.

In extracts 8:7 and 8:10 participants co-produce an '*insider*' and '*outsider*' *perspective*, variously described as 'onlooker' versus 'those that's seen it happen', routinely 'family'. The concerns rendered relevant are not just that problems get formulated differently, but, in addition, that somehow problems can be *misperceived* by those outside. In considering how the routine formulation onlooker/versus those who have 'seen it happen' works, the work of Sacks on entitlements to experience is useful.

Across data sets those who have direct, indirect or similar experiences are preferred; symmetry of experience appears to make in talk, 'understanding' programmatic. Sacks coined the notion of 'entitlements to experience' (LC4, p242, 1992) and highlighted the 'distributional character of experience' (p246). In explaining that entitlements to experience are differentially available Sacks wrote:

'the idea being that encountering an event like a possible news story, and encountering an event as a witness or someone who in part suffered by it, one is entitled to an experience; whereas the sheer fact of seeing things in the

world, like getting the story from another is quite a different thing' (Sacks, LC4, p243, 1992).

Sacks argued that 'if you haven't had an experience you're not entitled to feelings (associated with the experience)' (LC4 p246, 1992). However, if you have had an experience and you are told a similar experience by another, then, 'you can make very big generalisations from it' (Sacks, 1992, LC4 p246).

Family and an affiliative perspective

From Sacks's analysis, the ease with which close family and friends can get selected as preferred sources of help appears to rest on a routine inference that family share in the experience of other family members' problems; that they are somehow affiliated to the problem via category membership. I have identified in the first section of this chapter that this affiliation can be understood in terms of family obligations regarding 'keeping the problem in', but, in addition, there is something about an affiliative perspective. Given that one can routinely infer that close family members have shared experiences, then this provides for routine assumptions as in extract 8:7 (the family that's actually seen it happen) that family share in the experience.

It is not just close family members, however, that are seen as having some special privilege on the basis of experience to understand the problem. Rather, anyone who has had a similar position can be selected as able to 'understand'. Returning to extract 8:3, discussed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, C introduces the

notion of ‘somewhere where you are all the same’ (line 11). Her selection is confirmed and further explained by **B** who gives an example of why this category of persons is preferred - ‘they can *all* say, I’ve had a rotten time this week’ (line 12, emphasis added). Where people are ‘all the same’ a routine inference can be accountably made, namely that problems will be formulated in a similar (symmetrical) way on account of shared experiences; such people with experiences in common can all formulate the problem as ‘a rotten time this week’. ‘People all the same’ are juxtaposed with an expert who comes in (from outside the problem) and doesn’t ‘have a clue’. The participants co-produce an ‘outsider perspective’ as someone who does not share in experience of the problem and therefore may not ‘have a clue’. The expert does not share in any mutual understanding of the problem on account of asymmetry of experience, but where everyone is the same, there is more chance of seeing the problem the same way.

Understanding

Participants’ preference for symmetry of experience and, reflexively, symmetry of perception, touches on the issue of ‘understanding’ which presents as a further accountable matter in decision-making. The following extract is illustrative:

Extract 8:11

A: Get Jonnie from the bar (to **B**)

R: well - erm- we’ve probably got enough here for the group

A: Yeah, but he knows what this - erm - this - story’s talking about (indicating the vignette)

B: Yeah, he’s lived in this sort of situation, he’ll understand

C: Jonnie (shouting to the bar)

B: Jonnie, get your arse over here (Jonnie comes over).

This extract is taken from a focus group held in a pub, where five men were discussing part one of the vignette. The men insisted that someone else drinking in the pub should join the group, because he had direct experience of living in a reconstituted family. They saw that he had particular ‘authority’ on ‘the problem’. In extract 8:11 above, an account of a problem (in the vignette) occasions the relevance of experience of Jonnie’s own problems and reflexively that he can understand another’s problems.

Participants co-produce an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspective; one way of doing this is to invoke experience and what every one knows about entitlements to experience. Those party to a problem can be routinely inferred to have special privilege to understand (symmetrically formulate) the problem better. Family and friends, where a history is assumed, are seen as affiliated to the problem by experience and this can be assumed simply on the basis of membership of the device ‘family’.

To invoke diversity of experience is one way of co-producing interpretive asymmetry or an ‘outsider’ perspective; there are, however, further resources available.

Category incumbency and divergent accountabilities

In the extract below participants discuss the perspective of social services:

Extract 8:12

A: I mean there's the old joke about the social services and the Rottweiler, you know, it's easier to get your kids back off the Rottweiler (laughing)

C: They are archaic - in that they are only concerned there in this case with the child's safety. They would have not relate to Mike, they would not have to relate to Jenny, first and foremost they would protect the child, into the fact that if they thought that that child was in any way suspect of any threat they would put her out of the family.

(Transcript FG 14)

In extract 8:12 C identifies that there are alternative ways of formulating the scenario in question. C co-constructs an alternative interpretation/perspective by distinguishing between social services who are 'only concerned ... with the child's safety', 'first and foremost they would protect the child', and an alternative interpretation/perspective that considers Mike and Jenny. In achieving this distinction, C uses his knowledge of social services and category-predicated obligations to account for the distinction he draws. The socio-logic of his distinction rests on inter-subjective understandings about the focus of the work of social services who are accountably concerned with threats to children⁸⁶.

Extract 8:13

1. B: I wouldn't want anyone keeping a file on my family, I would find that really really scary.
2. because you can interpret things - I mean - like this (points to the vignette) - if social
3. workers really got involved in this, they could blow this all out of proportion, because he
4. had actually, physically touched the child, but it could be handled in another way//
5. C: It could be nothing though=
6. B: =it could be nothing - I mean 12 year old kids can be pushy, I mean I'm not saying that's
7. ever an excuse, but I know I've been tempted to clobber mine on occasions - and I mean I
8. know her Dad never loses his temper with her, but I do and there are times when he's sent
9. us to separate rooms of the house - "you go up there and you go down there and don't talk
10. to each other for the next half hour"

(Transcript FG1)

⁸⁶ Cuff has described the problem of versions (1980, 1994). Clearly for participants in this study the problem of versions is a central consideration in their decision-making.

In extract 8:13 participants again co-produce alternative perspectives on ‘the problem’. Social workers ‘could blow this out of proportion’ (line 3), ‘because he had actually, physically touched the child’ (here participants draw on mutually understood accountable concerns of social workers, lines 3-4), whereas ‘it could be nothing’ (line 6). C states, ‘it could be handled in another way’ (line 4), again pointing to the situatedness of problem and availability of different ways of ‘handling’ problems. Across this exchange, participants share in an understanding and make use of knowledge of category membership in drawing out these potential differences.

In both extracts above, participants make clear that category incumbency impacts on formulation of the problem. In the context of asymmetric SRPs, such as a person with a problem/social worker, *divergent* accountable concerns/interpretive frameworks are considered to impact on formulation work. Participants furnish out of their knowledge of how SRPs are organised, divergent perspectives on the problem. In the case of symmetric SRP’s such as family member-family member, then there is an assumption of symmetrical accountable concerns/interpretive frameworks, to do with ‘family first’, ‘obligations to each other’ and so forth (8:4).

Routine methods for resolving reality disjunctures

There is something further in the data, however, which suggests more inferential machinery at work and I will initially return to extract 8:13, to open the discussion. For B, it is not just that she does not want a file kept on her family, but that she would find it ‘scary’. She links ‘scary’ to ‘you can interpret things’ (lines 1-2); how

is it that diverse interpretations can be 'scary'? From the analytic standpoint of MCA, the question is, how is knowledge about SRPs routinely organised so that B's statement 'scary' makes inter-subjective sense? It is possible to throw some light on the understandings that drive B's statements by considering what Pollner has termed 'reality disjunctures' (1974).

In a paper entitled 'Mundane Reason' (1974), Pollner charts out the relationship between social actors and social reality, commencing from the premise that 'members rely on a panoply of suppositions regarding the inter-subjective character of events which they regard, rightly or wrongly, as the 'outer' or 'public domain' ' (1974, p35). Social actors use these suppositions 'as the grounds of inference and action' in practical reasoning and communicative activity. Given, as Pollner states, that members rely on a world known in common with other social actors, what then happens when social actors see the world differently, or, to use Pollner's term, 'a reality disjuncture' arises? Pollner makes the important observation that 'reality disjunctures' do not routinely throw the world into chaos, or raise questions for participants about the 'objectivity' of the social world. Given this premise, there must be some very accessible and routine methods of dealing with reality disjunctures. Pollner's work and also Coulter (1975), have detailed social actors' *systematic methods* for handling disjunctive accounts.

Pollner (1974) was interested in how conflicting claims of a defendant and the 'citing officer' in municipal traffic courts could result in a unanimous decision that one version was 'right'. Pollner states that social actors routinely proceed on the basis that if two social actors have witnessed the same event but see it differently

then one version must be correct and the other incorrect. The resolution of the puzzle of reality disjunctures in part lies in establishing 'what really happened'.

' Judge, defendant and officer frequently orient to not only describing and/or determining 'what really happened' on the streets, but to evaluating how the other could have produced a conflicting version of the scene' (Pollner, p36, 1974).

From observations of traffic courts, (sites of routine reality disjunctures), Pollner concluded that the systematic socially organised methods for dealing with reality disjuncture centred on establishing the *adequacy* of accounts and that the adequacy of accounts was *tied to membership categories*. The routine handling of reality disjuncture lay in *social relations*. Following Pollner, a series of further studies have identified a number of socially sanctioned and routine methods through which social actors establish the validity or authority of competing accounts and assign 'fault' to others. Coulter's research with lay members, mental welfare officers and psychiatrists reported on how, within these relationships, perceptual accounts were found 'acceptable or unacceptable in common-sense situations of judgements' (1975, p385). In common with Pollner, Coulter's interest centred on 'the management of communicative order' in the face of a potential threat to what Pollner referred to as 'the basic presupposition of a world-essentially-known-in-common' (p385, 1974). Coulter's analysis centred on detailed examination of conversations between the Mental Welfare Officers and their patients; Coulter concluded that a potential reality disjuncture is managed on the basis of 'faulting' the account of the patient; the patient's account is found to be erroneous. The line of

faulting is tied to the membership categorisation 'mental patient'. So we get the patient's version versus the doctor's version, with the doctor's version clearly routinely viewed as more credible. Coulter listed a whole series of methods of faulting accounts which he claimed provided for the handling of diverse perceptual accounts. Of particular relevance for this work are the following potential assignable fault lines:

- i) The perceiver as a person with 'special motives' to make false perceptual claims and;
- ii) the perceiver as a socially-located person with restricted entitlements to (claim to) have seen (or heard) what he reports.

It is now possible to return to extract 8:13 above and consider how it is that reality disjunctures, which involve client-social worker, are 'scary'. Retuning to the observations I have made in the previous chapter, participants routinely viewed social workers as involved with matters to do with 'child abuse' or 'serious cases'. In terms of membership categorisation, to enter child-welfare services is to become a client of an agency associated with this work. Thus, entering child-welfare services one not only gains incumbency of the SRP social worker-client but one also risks being perceived as an incumbent of the category child abuser. In light of the observations from Pollner and Coulter, one can thus begin to understand how it is that 'reality disjunctures' in this context are 'scary'.

Extract 8:14

1. **R:** OK, do you think child-welfare agencies should be involved? Do they need some
2. social work services? Do they need professional help?
3. **C:** I don't think so. There are these nurses that go round to houses and they have
4. names, they visit houses
5. **R:** Like a health visitor?
6. **C** Yes and these nurses know these sort of families, they get to know the
7. cases and if they
8. see something wrong they start making more frequent visits, there'll be
9. someone from the
10. council COMES TO ASSESS YOU AND TAKE YOUR KIDS AWAY (laughing)
11. **B:** Yes, well it can happen and that's why I'd probably go down the route of the doctor,
12. counselling - those types of things as the first route
13. **R:** Well it's interesting that you mention the doctor first which lots of people have done,
14. when they've been asked to respond to this - a lot of people have said the doctor feels like a
15. safe place to go//
16. **B:** And you can get referred to other services in any case and - cm - very often I think if you
17. get the full welfare system operating there will be a full assessment and all the rest of it, you
18. know, the whole family is put under the spotlight. If this was happening - every other day -
19. then yes
20. **R:** Well yes, like **C** was saying, if you get the full assessment and you get the spotlight on//
21. **C:** Once you've got that accusation of being A CHILD BASHER, you know how you do
22. move from being a child basher?- You know that's it for the rest of his life - "CHILD
23. BASHER". You see kids being taken away into homes and then being abused and all sorts
24. of things.

(Transcript FG8)

Throughout the exchange above, **C** rejects the researcher's suggestion of help from child-welfare agencies who put the 'spotlight' on and, when they get a sense of something going wrong 'make more frequent visits' (line 7). An accountable concern for **C** rests on the consequences of gaining incumbency of the category 'child basher'. **C** asks how do you move from being a child basher (lines 19-20). **C**'s statement turns on the issue of the limited or restricted entitlements that are routinely afforded 'child bashers' regarding credibility of challenging this label (incumbency). The individual is unable to challenge that label simply on account of ascribed incumbency; rather, he is stuck with it for 'the rest of his life' (line 20). Understandings about SRPs are embedded in a social, practical, moral geography which provides systematic methods for considering whose version holds more weight/authority; in *asymmetric* pairs one person's version *routinely* counts (Jayyusi

1984). Where asymmetric pairs centre on professional-service user relationships such as social-worker/service-user, there is much potential for the service user's version to be routinely discredited. Incumbents of the category 'child abusers' are clearly individuals who may easily be seen via social location to have 'restricted entitlements' to claim versions of reality. Child abusers, paedophiles, neglectful parents indeed are routinely treated as persons whose 'versions' are lesser, simply on the basis of category incumbency⁸⁷.

In the following extract, the participants are considering what action the mother in the vignette should take; the participants have been told that a teacher has found out. They make the following observation:

Extract 8:15

A: She needs to do something=

B: =she needs to do something, before it becomes a problem, especially now the teacher's found out=

C: =If the teacher passes it on to social services, then there's no coming back after that.

(Transcript FG7)

Participants state 'there's no coming back after that'. It is not just that the teacher has a duty to pass on information that is a problem, but that she may pass it on to social services. The participants anticipate a hypothetical point in the future where the person with the problem becomes an incumbent of the SRP social services-service user and all that that entails, as discussed in previous chapters. To become an incumbent of the SRP social worker-service user generates a further problem (she

⁸⁷ In chapter 1, I noted this was a feature of the literature on help-seeking and problem formation. Research commenced from an assumption of the objectivity and authority of professional diagnosis/definition.

needs to do something before it becomes a problem). In this extract participants understand that problems are co-produced. Invoking incumbency of the SRP service user-social worker can, as in this extract, result in the co-production of quite another sort of problem (and one that there is no coming back from). As Jayussi states:

‘with such asymmetric sets a certain sort of disjunction may arise where disjunctive accounts are produced, and where the account producers are contrastively located as incumbents of an asymmetric category set, then the resolution of the account’s disjunction is routinely made on the basis of the perceivedly asymmetric organisation of rights, duties and/or knowledge in favour of only one side of the category pair (Jayyusi, 1984, p122).

Thus, it is not surprising that participants render ‘who’ gets to formulate/co-produce the problem as a central relevance in decision-making.

Symmetric relationships and ‘the common ground’

Symmetric relationships contrast with asymmetric relationships, because in symmetric relationships it is *not* programmatic that one side is right and another wrong. Rather, there is the possibility, as Jayyusi writes, of coming to a shared understanding, compromise, agreement and so forth (1984). In asymmetric relationships the hearer’s maxim is to judge whose version is correct, whereas in symmetric relationships it is programmatically relevant to expect resolution, or to move towards a shared understanding:

‘...contrast this to many other instances of disjunctive accounts as between, for example, husband/wife (where it is not perceivedly asymmetric), friend/friend, neighbour/neighbour, where the possibility of a middle-ground resolution or a finding of ‘misunderstanding’ is programmatically relevant and routinely a preference. Similarly, the judgements and assessments produced by the presumed incumbents of each category pair part in an asymmetric set are also treatable asymmetrically where they are in disagreement. In other words, the practical maxim routinely used by members on such occasions is that “there is only one side to the story” or only one “proper”, “adequate” or “full version” ’ (Jayyusi, 1984, p122).

The following extract is illustrative:

Extract 8:16

1. **R:** Can I move you on then? Do you think child-welfare agencies should be involved?
2. (Waits for a response). I’m thinking here maybe social services or something like that? -
3. You are shaking your head John?
4. **B:** No, I don’t think so=
5. **C:** =no
6. **A:** no=
7. **B:** =no not necessary
8. **R:** No?
9. **C:** I’ve got a daughter. She used to work for social services. She used to look after abusive
10. families and immediately they are involved there is always two sides. They look at who is
11. doing what, whose side are they going to take. He’s the one who’s likely to be most blamed.
12. Which side are the children going to be safest with? - I think that’s more hassles, I really do
13. **D:** I would say at this stage, that some of the problems are just teething problems with the
14. family, and just getting together and bringing in social services or some suitable organisation
15. at this stage could cause problems=
16. **A:** =it would be making a mountain out of a molehill
17. **C:** I mean if you think about it, after this initial push and shove and he’s told her about his
18. problems. Rachael seems to be the only problem at the moment - they might come to
19. common ground. They might in the next problem be the best of buddies. You know “hang
20. on a minute, I know we’ve had our problems but we’ve discussed it and now we’ve found
21. the common ground”.

(Transcript FG15)

1. Participant in extract 8:16 refers to social services who work with 'abusive families' (line 9); they identify the possibility of a reality disjuncture - when they are involved 'there is always two sides' 'they look at who is doing what, whose side they are going to take' (lines 10-11).
2. This is contrasted with coming to 'a common ground' (lines 18-19), where symmetric relationships of family provide for the programmatic relevance of compromise, agreement and so forth.

From these short illustrations, it is possible to see further how 'understanding', that is symmetry of perspective, can be so important in the context of family problems that impact on the care of children. In asymmetric relationships it is not just that one's problems can be misperceived, but also, in the context of certain relationships, the anticipated consequences of this.

Limitations of symmetrical relationships as sources of help

In chapter 1, I suggested limitations with the existing literature on 'informal/formal' support. In particular few insights were offered about how an individual moves from one source of support to another. I noted in chapter 6 that if someone had no one to turn to, then 'outsiders' could become an option. I also said there were many reasons why an 'insider' might not be available, and not simply due to physical availability. From the selected research materials, and because of the social organisation of 'insider' relationships around 'reciprocation', then, if a social actor cannot enter into reciprocal relationships, then he or she may have 'no one to turn to'.

Extract 8:17

A: Her family?

R: Family

A: It says here about her family, its says there's her mother who's a widow and her sisters, without their support she does not look healthy

R: Yeah

A: She might turn to the family - but then again she might think I've put the family through enough hassle, and she might keep it all in.

(Transcript FG3)

In the above extract, in considering whether the fictitious character in the vignette can seek help, A states that the fictitious character may not go to her family, because she has 'put them through enough hassle'. In decision-making, assessment of the history of the relationship in terms of reciprocation is made relevant. If one has taken too much, as is suggested above, then one cannot take further from those resources. Participants make similar suggestions in the extract below:

Extract 8:18

R: So, you don't feel you have a lot of support then from your family?

P: When I moved down here, I left all my family in London, and it's not easy asking for help from my husband's family - for example, my sister-in-law's got five kids, if I ask her to have my two, then I have to have hers back and I can't really cope with them.

(Transcript BP11)

Individuals propose that relationships are reciprocally organised; this impacts on help-seeking decisions. In this interview (extract 8:18), P has indicated that she does not have a lot of support from her family and the researcher probes this. Her lack of support is attributable in part to the fact that her family are in London, but also because, with her sister-in-law for example, she feels unable to enter into reciprocal relationships. If she asks for help, she will be obligated to give help in return. In the

case of her sister-in-law, this would mean looking after her five children and she feels unable to do that. Given that insider relationships are reciprocally organised, when an individual seeks help, he or she makes an assessment of relevant 'insider' relationships along a number of lines to do with previous favours asked, what will be expected in return and so forth. It is the reciprocal organisation of 'insider' relationships which provides for criticisms such as 'it was all one sided', 'all take and no give' and so forth. There is also something further, however, and of considerable practical import, to do with the limitations of symmetrical organisations of relationships.

Extract 8:19

1. C: It's really, really difficult- I mean, when I went through what I went through, I didn't
2. confide in anybody, not even my mum, or my dad. I didn't confide in my mum and dad
3. because I didn't want to hurt them, I didn't want to confide in my friends because one of
4. them would probably have come to the house and tell my mother-in-law where to stick it,
5. she would, she'd be really mad, and I didn't want to upset them because my friends who
6. really cared and loved me and I didn't want them to see to see me, I didn't allow them to
7. see me. - When I moved into a rented house I didn't allow them to see me, S and my other
8. friends, because I didn't want them to see me like that - so I didn't confide in my friends I
9. didn't' confide in my sisters. - I think because I wasn't in my home town I just pretended
10. everything was fine, and my friends said "why didn't you tell us it was like that?" And you
11. do definitely try to make out as if everything is just fine- and I definitely would not have
12. gone to a welfare agency that was a no.
13. R: Why not?
14. C: I don't know how to say 'Idat', how do you say?
15. B: dignity=
16. C: =dignity, respect, I didn't' want his family to know about it, I didn't want him to know
17. about it or my family, I didn't' want anybody to know about it, not only family my in-laws,
18. respect as well. I think I also thought this is something that happens in all families and just
19. blows over, when you are going through it - I didn't' realise how bad it was.

(Transcript, FG18)

In extract 8:19, P is explaining to the group, why it is that she was unable to turn to her family for help. This particular extract is taken from a longer narrative in which P had told the group about the abuse she was suffering from her mother-in-law. She believed that her mother-in-law was practising voodoo on her young child. In the

context of this problem, the problem is so 'private' that she cannot even tell family or friends, 'she doesn't want them to see her like that', and 'she just pretended everything was fine' (lines 7-10). P's reluctance to seek help also centres, however, on her concerns about hurting her family. In this extract it is possible to see something further of how family and friends are affiliated to the problem; family and friends will be 'hurt' by finding out what is going on. P states: I didn't confide in my mum and dad because I didn't want to hurt them' (lines 2-3). Sometimes one's own problems are so painful or difficult that one cannot share those problems with those close and trusted because this means they too will feel the 'hurt'. This places limits on symmetrical relationships in terms of the provision of help, and sometimes with the most serious problems, those 'closest' can thus be the last to find out on account of this affiliation.

Discussion

That obligations between family members can be routinely considered as to *each other* (symmetric) was rendered a central relevance in these situated conversations along a number of dimensions. Firstly those categories which invoke close and trusted relationships can be routinely considered not to 'tell'- they respect a socially sanctioned boundary between 'inside' and 'outside'. In addition, in symmetric relationships 'understanding' is displayed as programmatic; symmetrical accountabilities and affiliations impact on the formulation of the problem. In contrast, in the case of the SRP: social worker-service-user relationship, the worker was accountably constituted as concerned with the 'situation' and in terms of 'telling' obligations are again asymmetrical.

Participants' use of the inferential apparatus to do with symmetry/asymmetry and SRPs was used to co-construct an 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective, variously expressed as 'those that have seen it happen' and 'onlookers'. 'Insiders' or those who share in the experience were preferred, as 'understanding' presented as programmatic when seeking help was considered. The accountabilities routinely associated with child-welfare agencies were rendered problematic by research participants who reported that the social worker's concern for the child was 'scary'. Social actors understood the problem of versions (Cuff, 1980, 1994) and understood that category membership impacts on whose version may be faulted.

Participants indicated, however, that there were (constituted) limits to insider reciprocal relationships and in this context it is important to consider how an alternative source of family support might be provided. Whilst not wanting to generalise from the data, it is possible to speculate that claiming some shared experience can be a powerful connector as discussed above and a way of getting on the 'inside'; I take this up further in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 9

A final word on ‘the problem’: Where does ‘the problem’ fit in situated

decision-making?

Introduction

Having identified in previous chapters some central accountable properties of situated decision-making in relation to the topic ‘help-seeking’, the question remains of where ‘the problem’ fits in decision-making processes. In the previous chapter I discussed how problem formulation gained relevance for participants in decision-making, illustrating participants’ concerns with i) the potential for problem misperception and ii) the impact of category incumbency upon problem formulation. In this chapter I make a number of further observations about *how* problem formulation gains relevance in decision-making and highlight the occasioned quality of problem formulation work.

‘Problems’ and ‘help’: from a definitional approach to the occasioned nature of problem formation

As I outlined in chapter 1, a central assumption within the extant literature is that how an individual defines his or her problems impacts on help-seeking behaviour.

The extant literature on help-seeking takes in the main a *definitional* approach and is based on the following assumptions:

1. Universal definitions are achievable (that is, convergence between help-seeker and help-provider as to the nature of 'the problem is both achievable and desirable).
2. Definitional agreement between help-seeker and help-provider will lead to increased help-seeking.
3. Under-utilisation of services is in part attributable to lack of problem recognition on the part of the help-seeker.

There was an acknowledgement within the extant help-seeking literature that defining problems is a 'relative' matter, namely that different social actors may see/formulate 'the problem' differently (Zahner et al., 1992; Pavuluri et al., 1995; Arcia et al., 1998; Tsogia et al., 2001; Barry et al., 2000; Fuller et al., 2000). However, despite this relativist standpoint, all studies retained as a research goal, consensus between lay and professional populations with regard to 'the problems' that should be recognised as warranting help. The limitation of a definitional approach, both philosophically and methodologically, is that there is a fundamental ontological inconsistency between a) holding that the social world is 'relative', and at the same time b) retaining aspiration towards *universal (objective)* definition (see Woolgar and Pawluch for a fuller discussion 1985⁸⁸). Within the help-seeking

⁸⁸ Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) have dealt in some detail with the methodological problems which beset the social constructionist programme. This contradiction centres on the assumption that events/matters are seen as socially constructed, yet treated as finite 'objective' statements for research purposes. As Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) have pointed out, if meaning is socially constructed, how can social phenomena also be considered as 'objectively' constant?

literature there is a pervasive aim of achieving 'better'/'real' or agreed understandings of problems by diverse social actors and this is premised on an assumption that there are 'problems out there' that can be objectively defined. In this chapter and commencing with the situated work of problem formation, it is possible to challenge and extend insights offered by the extant literature on help-seeking. I offer a number of observations illustrating the *occasioned* nature of problem formation. I discuss the implications these observations raise in relation to systems of child-welfare that are organised around social diagnosis and require as a starting point 'problems' as stable properties of the social world.

Commencing with the occasioned work of problem formation I will illustrate first, that formulating *a* problem is a central accountable property of decision-making, and second, that formulating work is a situated, negotiated and collaborative activity. 'Problems' are always formulated in and through situatedly relevant resources and for practical and occasioned purposes. There are no 'problems' outside those co-produced for situated purposes. Drawing attention to *how* problem formation is socially organised as a practical activity within situated decision-making throws a very different light on 'problems' and help-seeking, than that offered within the extant literature.

Problem formulation as a central accountable property of decision-making

Problem formation and situated decision making: some empirical examples

It is frequently claimed within the extant literature on help-seeking that how individuals define problems impacts on help-seeking. However, few empirical insights are offered in this literature to substantiate this claim, or indeed to show *how* this is so. In this chapter and starting with situated decision-making, I will initially illustrate that in conversations about help-seeking participants demonstrate that occasioning 'help-seeking' as a topic reflexively invokes a 'problem':

Extract 9:1

1. **B:** There's not been anything said, that Mike's, first part or second part (of
2. vignette), whether he's come out of another relationship, whether he's had any
3. relationship with children, whether he thought about this beforehand?
4. **C:** We don't know an awful lot, do we?
5. **B:** We don't know much about any of them.
6. **R:** No, that's a good point.
7. **C:** We don't know how old Mike is, if he's come from being single with no
8. kids. Jenny's perhaps got - you know - she might have a decent house, decent
9. car and all the rest of it, and he's got his priorities right and she thinks, oh you
10. know -. Anyway, that's what he's looking for, a bit of stability, but then if he's
11. never had any experience of dealing with kids of different ages, the way he
12. speaks to the blokes at work, and stuff like that, not being aggressive but that
13. sort of - you know - attitude with say blokes at work. He's trying to get that
14. across to the kids - the kids at home and he's doing that by the only way he
15. knows how to do it.
16. **R:** But you still think that Mike's not going to be going to ask for any help
17. anywhere?
18. **B:** No, I don't think, no//
19. **C:** But we're still back to not knowing what his problem is, (laughing). I mean,
20. if you don't know what the problem is, you don't know what to do to try and
21. sort it out. I mean, if it's purely down to the children, then he would go
22. possibly to somebody - err - somebody that had a large family - a friend, and
23. say "how are you dealing with the children at certain ages?" - etc. If it's
24. suddenly realising the responsibility of what he's took on, is it worth what he
25. had initially in mind, with whatever her name was Jenny? - Then the next best
26. thing is to talk to somebody else in a similar position. But I still don't think
27. he's going to go to professional help, depending on what the problem is. - It
28. all falls back on that.

(Transcript FG14)

In extract 9:1 focus group participants have been asked to consider if and where Mike needs help. In the opening utterances of this extract the participants co-produce a specific difficulty. It is difficult to consider whether Mike needs help because the vignette has not provided them with sufficient information. C states 'we don't know an awful lot, do we?' (line 4) and later adds 'if you don't know what the problem is you don't know what to do to try and sort it out' (lines 20-21). The male participants indicate that they are unable to make a decision about 'help-seeking' because there are insufficient details presented in the vignette to enable them to formulate the problem. In talk, the participants raise a number of questions pertaining to the information that they consider relevant in order to formulate the problem, 'is he single?' 'has he had any experience of this before?' and so forth. They share a frustration with the limited information provided in the vignette and state that 'there's been nothing said ... first part or second part' (line 1) to provide them with the information needed to make a decision about appropriate help. The information that is 'missing' relates to 'not knowing what his problem is' (line 19). What is interesting about this extract is that whilst talk initially proceeds on the basis of 'we don't know enough' (emphasis added), at lines 20-21, C begins to evoke the *generality* of the practical problem they face. C states: 'if *you* don't' know what the problem is, you don't know what to do to sort it out' (emphasis added). From this extract it is possible to conclude that:

1. The researcher's initial question invokes, reflexively 'the problem'.
2. Formulation of 'the problem' is a central accountable property of situated decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking'.
3. Different situatedly formulated and agreed problems, make relevant different forms of help.

In extract 9:2 below, formulating the problem is again central to decision-making:

Extract 9:2

1. **R:** So, the first question that I'm asking people is, what does it mean to you to
2. ask for help? - And you can answer that in relation to getting your car fixed,
3. your kids, issues for yourself. What does it mean to you to ask for help?
4. **P:** OK, to ask for help is to appreciate the fact that there's a problem first and
5. foremost, and to ask for help means that you want to get assistance from
6. somebody who is qualified or in a position to give you help, and - erm - in order
7. to do that - em -. To give a very obvious example. Your car's needing getting
8. fixed, you go to a car mechanic and get it fixed. You've got a problem with
9. raising some money you go to the bank. Alternatively, you might have a
10. problem and not know who is the best person to get help from.
11. **R:** Yeah, OK - , I'm going to ask you something a bit more specific now. Can
12. you tell me anything about your experiences of asking for help?
13. **P:** I would say that I am probably actually able to put my feelings into words
14. (R: Ah ha) and always been able to ask for help and get assistance as required.
15. (R: Yeah). - I don't have a problem really
16. **R:** So, in lots of ways you're quite an assertive person when it comes//
17. **P:** Yes, maybe, able to put what my problem is into words, describe it
18. accurately, because you waste an awful lot of time skirting round the real issue.
19. I always get straight to the point. There's my problem, how are you going to fix
20. it?
21. **R:** OK, so that's sort of general - that's fine. - Can you tell me who you would
22. turn to for help with bringing up your children?
23. **P:** First and foremost, my husband. - Err - then after family (R: Ah ha) particularly
24. my mum or his mum. If it was a medical thing then I would go to a doctor, GP.
25. If it was dental then I'd go to the dentist, and erm - that's about it really.

(Transcript int4)

In extract 9:2, the participant makes clear in her initial utterance that 'to ask for help', is 'to appreciate the fact that there's a problem' (line 4). 'Problem' is an inference from

help and is invoked reflexively, following my initial question ('what does it mean to you to ask for help?'). As the exchange progresses, the participant makes further connections between 'types' of problems and sources of help. She states: 'your car's needing getting fixed, you go to a car mechanic', 'you've got a problem raising some money, you go to the bank' (lines 8-9). The participant indicates that there is a relationship between the 'type' of problem and the type of help and that in considering the relevance of any form of help it is necessary to consider the match between the (occasioned) problem and the source of help; 'medical' invokes the 'doctor', 'dental' invokes the 'dentist' (lines 24-25).

Extract 9:3

R: Can I just ask you to lean over this tape a bit, because otherwise it won't pick it up. Do you think there are any problems that the family need help with?

A: Not that//

C: Outside the home? – No, probably not=

A: =no it's just like a normal family situation now - you know//

B: No, it's just a normal family - sounds like a normal family now=/

C: =like a normal family now//

A: Dunnit now? - You know=

B: =normal situation//

C: Normal situation, yeah

B: And she's got her mother and sisters to talk to if she feels that she needs to thrash it out with somebody. It's not as if she needs counselling or anything because they do that don't they - the extended family do that you know.

(Transcript FG1)

In chapter 5, I discussed extract 9:3 above. In this extract C asks the question 'outside the home?' in response to the researcher's question. In A's response to C, 'No it's just like a normal family', again the reflexive relationship between 'the problem' and the

selected collectivity of help is displayed. A's rejection of those 'outside' is based on her situated formulation of this family as 'just a normal family'. In extracts 9:1, 9:2 and 9:3, the situated work of problem formation is a central accountable property of decision-making. If 'help' invokes reflexively 'the problem' and vice versa, the question this raises is, *how* does this work? This question has not been addressed in the extant literature on help-seeking, but an understanding of *how* this works is useful.

Co-selection of category and activity

It is possible to consider initially that help is a straightforward inference from problem and vice versa (see my comments on MIR in chapter 4). However, Sacks observations about co-selection of category and activity allow an expansion of the analysis. Sacks identified from analysis of practical reasoning that categorisation was organised (accountably) around preference for *co-selection of category and activity*, as a *pervasive* and *orderly* feature of communicative interaction. It is this pervasive feature of communicative interaction, with no time out, which provides for the reflexive relationship between 'problems' and 'helps' as illustrated. Returning to extract 9:1, the difficulty the men are raising, that '*we don't know enough*' and the sense of P's claim in extract 9:2, 'that to ask for help is to appreciate the fact that there's a problem', present as rational statements because of the social organisation of categorisation around co-selection of category and activity. Co-selection of category and activity results in social actors *routinely* considering what can be glossed as a 'match' between the (situatedly) formulated problem and the potential source of help. Because categorisation works in

this way, as a *pervasive* generic feature of practical reasoning, the relationship between ‘problems’ and sources of help, is *generically* a key resource for social actors (not specific to trained professionals or any other distinct social group).

There is a danger in simply inferring from the observations above that in order to facilitate appropriate help-seeking, one simply needs to educate the public about the kinds of problems that outside agencies offer help with, in order to facilitate appropriate help-seeking. I have already stated that, in this study, ‘child-welfare’ routinely invoked ‘child protection work’. It would be tempting to infer from this observation that if categorisation work is organised around co-selection of category and activity, then all that is necessary is to re-educate the public about re-focused family-friendly services (chapter 1) and families would be encouraged to seek help at an earlier point. If families were advised that child-welfare services had a remit to respond to broad problems of family stress, then families might seek help with a broader range of problems and thus prevent family breakdown. It is, however, possible to further unpack the occasionedness of formulation work and begin to understand how it is that such simplistic solutions, as exemplified by public health campaigns, frequently fail.

Formulating problems for practical purposes.

It is important to underline that asking about the suitability of a selected help-provider makes the *formulating* of ‘problems’ relevant. Formulation work is, however, not an

abstract activity, but is always situated. Selection of a category of helper makes occasionally relevant a *context for formulation work*. Suggesting or asking questions about certain help providers invokes, reflexively, occasionally relevant ways of thinking about, measuring or doing formulation work. Extract 9:3 above provides a very clear illustration of this. When participant A formulates 'the problem', she uses the binary 'normal/not normal'. On the basis of co-selection of category and activity, 'normal' gains relevance in relation to the category collectivity 'outside' help. It is not that normal/not normal is some kind of objective assessment device that is trans-situationally relevant, rather it is a device made *occasionally relevant* given reference to 'outside help' (see my comments in chapter 7 about the work routinely associated with outside helping agencies). The following extract provides a further illustration:

Extract 9:4

1. **B:** Would not, - it's a very, it's at the periphery of what the social services would get
 2. involved and I think what we are supposed to be commenting on - is - should social
 3. services- should they go in, in this instance and if so how? - Alright? (to interviewer)
 4. **R:** And that's a perfectly acceptable line of discussion.
 5. **A:** My wife actually works for social services (**R:** Does she?) and//
 6. **D:** Why would social services get involved in a situation like this?
 7. **B:** No, it's at the periphery//
 8. **D:** Is it really, is it that final? Is it that?//
 9. **B:** No, no, I would suggest at the moment that this is, that this is the step, just, one step
 10. removed.
 11. **C:** There's been one incident=
 12. **B:**=there's been one incident, and it's not at the stage that social services would normally get
 13. involved in. The question is, should they? - (**A:** Should?). Should funding be made available
 14. to help families like this?
 15. **A:** I think you'd find no social services would get involved with this. A guy's come into the
 16. house, he's shoved the girl once, unless the mother complains, (**C:** That's what I'm saying),
 17. unless the mother complains, and even when she does complain, social services will not get
 18. involved in that case (**D:** I totally agree with that)//
 19. **R:** Would not?
 20. **A:** No, would not. It's a family unit, (**D:** For what reason?), there's no abuse=
 21. **B:** =no, it's just discipline, he's, possibly, possibly overstepped the mark.
- (Transcript FG9)

In this extract consideration of one source of help, specifically social services, makes occasionally relevant 'abuse'. That abuse gains relevance in relation to the suggestion of this source of help is evident in the search procedures generated (see my observations chapter 8). The kinds of questions that are asked in formulating 'the problem' arise from situated relevancies generated by the co-selection of 'social services'/'abuse'. The participants do not formulate the problem in an abstract sense. Rather, social services and the work associated with this category serves as a referent. The expression 'it's just one step removed' relies for its sense on, and gains relevance in relation to, the referent social services (lines 9-10). The participants consider 'the point' or 'stage' of intervention. They also focus on the frequency of the event. These considerations are all made relevant *in situ*, given participant invocation of social services and the co-selected activity (by implication) dealing with more than one or more serious 'incidents' (lines 13-16). The formulation of the behaviour as 'just discipline' is therefore a contexted formulation, arising from inter-subjective understandings about the relevancies at hand.

From these observations it is possible to make a further and very central claim. The formulation of any problem is always tied to specific practical purposes; in the above extract the practical purpose is articulated by A - 'I think what we are supposed to be commenting on is should social services ... go in this instance? It is possible to look at a further and perhaps more obvious illustration of this generic property of problem formation work in the following interview. In this extract the participant gives an example of formulating the problem for a specific purpose:

Extract 9:5

1. R: So let's go back to what you were saying about the difficulties of getting respite for Davie -
2. P: Well - it did take some time to get into place - and during that time Davie was having big
3. problems with school, and even on home on occasions. It was really bad, and I was just
4. knackered, really knackered - and - err - erm - I did lash out at him a couple of times -. And
5. so I rang and I said, "I NEED SOMEBODY TO HELP ME" "HELP ME"- you know just
6. desperate. "I need somebody to help me". I couldn't take it, I needed to have a break. So
7. that's when, you know - I rang up one day and said " I CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE, I
8. CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE, I AM GOING TO KILL HIM" (in a loud crying voice), and -
9. err - really laid it on thick -.
10. R: Did you feel you had to make a case, to be absolutely desperate to get the help or - ?
11. P: Truth be known, I had to create the situation to get what I had wanted. I had to play on
12. the situation. I mean, I could have probably quite happily calmed myself, gone and got him
13. from the shed. We could have played the Postman Pat game and the cuddle game and it
14. would have been fine, it would have been sorted. But I think at the back of my mind I was
15. going to use it to get sorted- because - I knew//
16. R: So how old was Davie when you eventually got a carer?
17. P: Oh, he's now eight and it's only recently, yeah, eight.

(Transcript Int27)

In extract 9:5 above, the participant makes clear that problems are formulated for specific purposes. This mother had initially attempted to obtain respite care for her son Davie who had emotional and behavioural difficulties. Because her initial formulation of the problem, needing 'respite' was unsuccessful, she re-formulated her problems in order get a response from the help-provider. In this extract she is recounting the process of re-formulating the problem for the practical purpose of obtaining respite care. She decides for the practical purpose of 'getting a response', that she 'err - really laid it on thick' (lines 8-9). She says 'I had to create the situation to get what I had wanted; I had to play on the situation' (lines 11-12). In this instance it is her knowledge of how to get a response from the selected provider which is the situated relevance and which informs her formulation of the problem *for* the selected help-provider. The participant uses her knowledge of the category of help-provider and the kinds of situations they will respond

to quickly ('I AM GOING TO KILL HIM', line 8) in order to obtain a desired response.

In the following extract, participants also display their understandings that problems can/should be formulated in certain ways for certain practical purposes:

Extract 9:6

C: Mike should go to his GP//

B: And say what?

D: And say look//

B: But does Mike realise he's got a problem?

C: Well, he should be forced to know

A: Well, who's going to force him?

C: Well, Jenny

A: Is she strong enough. Does she wants to upset him?

D: I think he should go to the doctor because there's something wrong with him//

A: I think Jenny would shy away from it//

B: Is he going to confess to a doctor?

C: Well you can dress it up better than that, can't you? You can say "I'm depressed, the stress at work" or whatever - you've got psychological problems somewhere - so.

(Transcript FG9)

In this extract the participants are engaged in *in situ* formulation work. Using the resources at hand (vignette and discussion) they debate whether Mike is 'a nice lad who's just been pushed or if he's been Jack the lad'. This extract illustrates the co-production *in situ* of 'the problem', but also, as the exchange progresses the participants illustrate that problems are always formulated for specific purposes. Whilst they formulate the problem in relation to the specific demands of the focus group question, they also illustrate that Mike, for the hypothetical task of asking for help from the doctor, can 'dress the problem up' better. Whether the participants engage in, *in situ* formulation or consider a hypothetical other, for these men problems are formulated for certain audiences in certain ways. In the case of their consideration of the fictitious character Mike, it is the practical task arising from membership categorisation (doctor)

that sets the relevancies for formulating work. Both extracts above illustrate that formulation work is a practical moral activity tied to specific practical purposes and category-predicates of sources of help.

Problems are always formulated a) for situated practical purposes and b) in and through occasionally relevant contexted resources. Problems are therefore not constituted in and through de-contextualised resources of theorising, measurement or assessment work, but always in relation to devices/resources-made-relevant. It is this organisation of problem formation work which renders 'problems' as always occasioned. This is a very important point, but a point missed in the extant literature. Whilst it is possible to say that (i) problem formulation is an accountable property of decision-making in relation to the topic 'help-seeking' and (ii) to identify relevancies which provide a context for formulation work, it is not possible to identify objective 'problems' which have a stable reality outside of this formulation work. This conclusion undermines the objectivist programme of social diagnosis upon which the majority of studies of help-seeking are premised and suggests alternative avenues for future research.

Problem formulation as one ethnomethod among many, in help-seeking decision-making

Taking any extract of formulation work, participants' practical reasoning presents as a complex set of nesting of inferential work. Central to decision-making is a complex weave of occasioned ethnomethods which provide for the selection of one source of help over another. Thus, formulating the problem is always bound up with other accountable properties of decision-making. It is difficult to think in terms of abstract, once-and-for-all, causal linear relationships which lead to this or that help-seeking decision. Formulating the 'presenting problem' (condition, syndrome) is simply one ethnomethod bound up with other key methods rendered occasionally relevant; assuming any direct correspondence between problem definition and *then* seeking help is thus problematic. To suggest such a linear relationship is, however, typical of the abstracting methods of constructive theorising but risks oversimplifying situated processes of decision-making. The following extract is illustrative:

Extract 9:7

1. **R:** So who do you think Mike can go to for help?
2. **A:** If you really think about it, it's not a big deal as to what's happened. It's
3. like making a big deal over little matters
4. **B:** Yes, he has only asked her to tidy her room, not asked her to have an
5. alcoholic drink or eat anything harmful (referring to halal meat)
6. **A:** We all tidy up=
7. **B:** =we all tidy up at home and tell our children to tidy up//
8. **A:** Even though he is a different religion, he's only asking her to tidy up.
He
9. wants the house to be clean and tidy because he is used to having everything
10. clean and maybe Sabiha's kids are used to living in an untidy house.
11. **B:** Where should Mike go for help?
12. **C:** They should try and first resolve the problems themselves. If not, go to the

13. community centre members or a social worker
14. **R:** What do you think about the children, are you worried about the children?
15. You have been told in this scenario that Mike has shouted aggressively and
16. pushed Hawabibi, so what are your concerns?
17. **A:** It shows that the children have no safety.
18. **B:** No, no, even your own father would hit his own child – the reason being,
19. what if the social took the kids? So you are trying to say if the real father hit
20. their own children, his own family is going to grass on him and put him in
21. jail?
22. **A:** An example of my own is that the children have no safety, the children
23. have no safety, they might be abused in some way, and what shall we say to the
24. grandmother?
25. **C:** Mike is right to be angry, but not to push the girl in any way
26. **R:** Should we now involve the social?
27. **B:** Everyone should think carefully for a minute - here's a five-minute problem,
28. which I think personally is not too big and this will create a big future
29. problem, even the loss of another Dad. Also involving the social - it will hurt
30. the mother more, as it's her children not Mike's. Mike may not have the same
31. feelings as Sabiha for the kids.

(Transcript FG 11)

This extract is taken from a focus group facilitated and translated by a Gujarati speaking community researcher. In this extract, the researcher asks 'so who do you think Mike can go to for help?' A responds by offering the following assessment/formulation of the problem: 'it's not a big deal as to what's happened' (line 2). B confirms A's formulation of the problem in the next utterance, co-producing this problem as not a big deal. A states: 'he's only asked her to tidy her room, not ask her to have an alcoholic drink' (line 4). As the exchange progresses, however, a further 'problem' is formulated by participants and this is, 'what if the social took the kids', and as B elaborates in the final utterance (lines 27-31), 'here's a five-minute problem which I think personally is not too big, and this will create a big future problem'. In chapter 7, I stated that 'risk management' presented as programmatic when *seeking* help from 'outsiders' was made relevant in talk, in this context and considering the potential further risks associated with 'the social', in the above extract a further problem is formulated. The work of the

‘social’ may create ‘a big future problem’ in this instance for participants the response of the agency is also formulated as ‘a problem’.

Discussion

Problem formulation is always an *occasioned* activity; problems are always situated, co-produced, negotiated and tied to particular practical purposes. Whilst a belief in the sense of the objectivity of problems is something shared by diverse social actors alike (see chapter 8), there is no ‘problem’ outside of those co-produced reflexively, in and through contextual and occasioned relevancies. Therefore, the pursuit of finite ‘out there’ problems that can be agreed by diverse social actors is fundamentally flawed. The practical implication from this claim is that child-welfare services organised around social diagnosis, and the detection/identification of problems with a ‘found out there reality’ is as a starting point for offering help or understanding help-seeking, tenuous.

A whole programme of research in policy and practice arenas to do with safeguarding children and supporting families has been premised on objectivist and definitional approaches to understanding ‘problems’ (DOH, 1995; DfES, 2004; Portwood, 1999). A key study by Cleaver and Freeman (1995), which focused on parental perspectives, found in many instances that families differed in their view of allegations made against them with respect to child abuse or problems of parenting. Research and practice have made it their business to work towards agreement between diverse actors as to the

nature of problems, rather than attempt to ‘unpack’ *how* it is that the diverse perspectives on ‘problems’, identified by those such as Cleaver and Freeman (1995), are manifest. The limitation with this kind of thinking is that it misses the occasionedness of problem formation as a generic property of *all* formulating work. Whilst for the social workers in Cleaver and Freeman’s study, coming to a recognisable and legitimated professional assessment of ‘child maltreatment’ may serve his or her practical occupational purposes, for the service-user a whole range of divergent practical purposes may provide the context for his or her formulating work. Consideration of category membership can provide a practical context (purpose); it may be for the incumbent of the SRP social worker-service-user, that practical purposes have more to do with preserving face, retaining children and so forth, than agreeing ‘the problem’ as formulated by the social worker.

Whilst it is not possible to generalise from the particular data used in this study, it is possible to argue that ‘problems’ may have for their formulators a temporal, occasionally-relevant semblance of reality. However, the occasionedness of formulating work inevitably leads to the problem of versions (Cuff, 1980; 1994). A more productive focus might be to start with the inherent problem of versions and shift the focus of service away from identification/assessment of ‘the problem’ towards *response to requests for help*. I take this up further in the next concluding chapter.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

Introduction

Whilst the findings from this study are necessarily limited to analysis of situated talk about 'help-seeking', it is possible to draw from the analysis a number of questions for further research, thus opening up new avenues of enquiry in relation to child welfare. As I indicated in chapter 1, there is a circularity to the debates in the literature on help-seeking and my intention in this study, in taking an alternative methodological approach, has been to stimulate new avenues of thinking about this topic. I return to the extract I drew from Jayyusi (1984) in chapter 3:

What further issues, questions, and findings about the social order does any particular analysis open up? That is to say what horizon of significance can one uncover? (Jayyusi, 1984, p1).

In this conclusion, I will discuss the findings from the previous chapters and make a number of comments that are pertinent to key areas of child welfare policy and practice development.

Outside help: A residual resource

I will start with what is perhaps the most obvious but important observation. When presented with questions which posed hypothetical help-seeking choices, participants in this study made clear that choices were organised around ‘first-position pairs’ and ‘last-position pairs’, with ‘outside’ help a last resort (chapter 6). From this study, findings indicate that for help in the context of family problems that impact on the care of children, those categories constituted as ‘inside’ the family circle’ were both programmatically relevant and considered a first port of call with ‘outside’ help, frequently child-welfare agencies, routinely constituted as a *residual* resource. For example, when asked about parenting problems, participants routinely suggested that it was perfectly reasonable to attempt to ‘cope’ or seek help from family, even in the face of serious difficulties, rather than *seek* help from ‘outside’. Whilst specialist ‘outside’ help might be an option, for problems of parenting questions about help did not readily invoke ‘outside’ sources. From analysis of the selected research materials, the categories ‘family’ and ‘friends’ were routinely occasioned as a first choice for help and such ordering work was routinely treated as a ‘natural order’, such that when a selection of a designated ‘insider’ was made, no questions, queries, or calls to elaborate were required.

Whilst it is not possible to generalise from this data to help-seeking behaviour in diverse contexts, observation of the constitution of a socially sanctioned order to ‘help-seeking’ in situated talk does enable speculations to be made and further questions to be raised

about the current organisation of research and practice in child welfare. I will commence with a discussion of child-welfare policy and practice around prevention and early intervention, reflecting on the findings in talk about 'outside' help: a residual resource.

Prevention and early intervention

Sustained energies have gone into re-thinking and re-designing family-friendly support services. Family support services aim to intervene in family life, *prior to* the onset of serious difficulties, thus preventing family breakdown (Little, 1999; Manktelow, 2003; DOH, 2000; DfES, 2003). Early intervention and prevention are the cornerstones of contemporary child-welfare services. However, a key and consistent finding across evaluative studies is that families *continue* to enter services too late. It is clear that a significant number of families continue to enter services at the point of family breakdown, with numerous studies reporting continued failure to effect change in families where serious problems are long-standing (Hansen and Warner, 1994; McDonald and Williamson 2002; Oakley et al., 1998; McGowan and Walsh 2000, 2000; Brown and Dillenberger, 2004; Statham and Holterman, 2004; Broadhurst and May-Chahal, 2005). The Children Act Report 2003 (DfES 2004c) details no significant decrease in the number of children entering public care. Studies have also reported rising numbers of women and children fleeing domestic violence with an 8% increase in women using women's refuges between April 2003-March 2004 (Community Care 17 February 2005). In the last year, record numbers of children have entered custody

(Howard League 2005). From such indicators, serious questions have been asked about the effectiveness of re-focused family support services to prevent family breakdown.

Currently re-focused services are somewhat baffled by their failure to effect change and engage families at an earlier point. As I suggested in chapter 1, there remains some detail that continues to evade researchers. In this study, and in offering empirical details about situated decision-making, whilst not wishing to directly generalise from the data, I suggest that the reluctance of families to either approach services or accept help may simply reflect the social organisation of help-seeking (with 'outside' help a last resort). From the findings in this study, I suggest that the current organisation and delivery of preventative family support services may be at odds with the social organisation of help-seeking in a number of ways and that this question could certainly frame future research studies.

Entry to services some continuities

Preventative services continue to be offered on the basis of *social diagnosis* and in the main professional identification and assessment of need. The starting point for the help-provider/help-seeker relationship is frequently professional referral, prompted by the identification of an organisationally relevant 'problem' such as concerns about child-maltreatment. Service-providers have paid little attention to how decisions to seek (receive) help are socially organised. At a national level, whilst there is distinct concern about 'hard to reach' families (Frost et al., 2000; Macdonald and Williamson, 2002;

Broadhurst and May-Chahal, 2005), and an increasing awareness of the limitations of provision when families enter services too late, there has been little sustained discussion of help-seeking as a practical activity within child-welfare. The trend of social *diagnosis*, which can be traced to the work of Mary Richmond (1917), is still very much a feature of contemporary children's services. Developments in children's services towards new integrated provision, continue to place the responsibility to *identify* a child in need very firmly in the hands of a range of professionals and according to a range of professionally defined 'problems' (constituted as stable properties of the social world) (DfES, 2003; DfES 2004b). There is continued concern that vulnerable children are 'slipping through the net'; however, the solution lies in appropriate training and development of the children's workforce in the core skills of detection and identification of need (DfES, 2003, 2004a). Central to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), for example, is inter-professional collaboration around identification and assessment of need. Proponents of CAF envisage that a common language of need will lead to earlier and better identification:

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) for Children and Young People is a key part of the strategy to shift the focus from dealing with the consequences of difficulties in children's lives to preventing things from going wrong in the first place ... The CAF will promote effective, earlier intervention of children's additional needs and improve multi-agency working. (DfES, p1, 2005)

A limitation of social diagnosis as a starting point for help-providing is that this mode of service delivery is organised around 'the problem' (as organisationally defined) as

the stimulus for service delivery. In contrast, for the help-seeker, seeking help from 'outside' may have more to do with 'no-one to turn to' as suggested from this study (chapter 6), than the identification of 'a problem' as defined as relevant by child-welfare agencies. From this study of decision-making, choices of help were found to be sequenced around a co-produced and socially sanctioned order and this is quite a different understanding of 'stages' than that offered by the stage models of help-seeking (chapter 6). It may be that in this context to offer help to an individual who considers that they have 'someone to turn to', breaches a socially sanctioned order of help-seeking. Sacks writes:

'The fact that some persons or classes of persons are willing to give help, or hold themselves up to give help, or propose their special competence to give help, doesn't make them proper to turn to' (Sacks, p74, 1966).

In addition, to present to services with 'no-one to turn to' may, not in itself, be sufficient to prompt a service response. The help-seeker is required to meet the eligibility criteria for help, which requires that an organisationally relevant problem is presented, such as potential harm to a child.

The Common Assessment Framework is now part and parcel of the landscape of child-welfare delivery. The potential of CAF to facilitate the identification of vulnerable children is widespread. For example, Thorpe et al., (2005) reporting on developments in North Lincolnshire Social Services, commend the authority in developing the

aspirations of CAF towards a common language which is seen as leading to better diagnosis. There is, however, a distinct absence of initiatives which seek to understand the social organisation of help-seeking or consider how services might be organised so as to 'fit' better with help-seeking decision-making. Little (1999) undertook a comprehensive review of the literature on early intervention and prevention and set out a template for effective practice, making no reference to help-seeking in target communities.

Studies of current referral patterns indicate that the majority of referrals to statutory agencies⁸⁹ continue to be dominated by professional referral, with a much lower percentage constituting direct referrals from families themselves (Manktelow, 2003). Research has indicated significant problems with this method of service delivery, both nationally and internationally, as a significant number of referrals result in either no service allocated, or lack of uptake of services. In addition there are significant concerns that 'children in need' (as defined by the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, DOH 2000) fail to be identified by professionals (Parton, 2006, forthcoming). Despite these research findings surprisingly few questions have been asked about this continued mode of entry to services (Thorpe, 1994; Parton et al., 1997; DOH, 1994; 1995; Parton et al., 1996; Wattam, 2002; Parton, 2006 forthcoming). In the wake of the re-focusing debate a number of studies have continued to report a mismatch between referrals and uptake of services; however, such findings seem

⁸⁹ I encountered some anecdotal evidence during the course of this research which suggested that certain voluntary sector projects were successful in increasing self-referral rates; there are, however, no empirical studies reported to date.

somewhat overlooked. Oakley (1998) examined the uptake of Home-start services post referral and reported that only one in ten referrals resulted in the uptake of services. In a more recent study in Ireland, Buckley (2002) found that although the highest number of referrals pertained to child neglect, the majority of such referrals resulted in no services being offered. A similar pattern holds in the US with a number of authors estimating average attrition rates, or non-uptake of services standing at some 50% (Daro and Donnelly, 2002).

The machinery of CAF, which has been heralded as the new panacea for problems of ‘hard to reach families’ or ‘families slipping through the net’, remains entrenched in the language of detection and surveillance; indeed it constitutes an *expansion* of practices that have previously found to be wanting. Critics such as Garrett (2004) have argued that contemporary developments represent a further fundamental shift towards surveillance, with an increasing onus on the distribution of statistical information to inform the identification of ‘children at risk’.

Terms of engagement

Recent evaluative studies suggest there are clearly problems of *engagement*, with services reporting problems with attrition rates and lack of engagement. Whilst a number of commentators have suggested that a system premised on detection and reporting places the professional in a weak starting position from the beginning (in terms of developing relationships with services users), there has been little sustained

questioning of these terms of engagement (Wattam, 1996, 2002). From this study, detailed analysis of decision-making patterns found that there was an *exclusivity to* 'insiders' which provided for the help-seeker's maxim in situated decision-making: 'if insiders are, available use them first'. Whilst not generalising directly from the data, it is possible to speculate that, problems of non-engagement may be as a result of the help-seeker perceiving the party offering help as superfluous to requirements, if resources are perceived as effectively offered 'in-house'. Given that in talk it has been possible to observe the situated constitution of a socially sanctioned order to 'help-seeking' which was for each and every occasion of help-seeking an occasioned matter, this suggests that it is difficult to make requests for help on behalf of another, unless this form of advocating or representation has been requested. From this study, there is significant potential for unsolicited third-party referral to *breach* the socially sanctioned methodological concerns that influence the help-seeker's decisions about where to seek help. This is not to suggest that a skilled worker might be able to attain an 'insider position', but to suggest that the difficulties that agencies report around engagement are not surprising given the small number of self-referrals.

'Self as a first resource'

From an analysis of the research materials, seeking help was not only constituted as 'a last resort', but in addition asking for help was routinely constituted by participants as both a sign of failure and deficiency. Whilst early intervention may be the cornerstone of re-focused family services and thus be positively morally implicative, from the

research materials, the reverse was manifest in decision-making. Participants occasioned the *social helping* agencies that have a brief to support families and safeguard children, as associated with ‘discredited’ groups who cannot effectively cope (chapters 6 & 7). Indeed, the users of the social helping agencies that support families were constituted as *at best* not coping but also ‘maltreating’. Participants considered that to ask for help from those agencies one gained at the outset incumbency of social groups marked out for some special consideration regarding adequacy of parenting and provision for family. This observation suggests that to seek help is to place one’s competence in question.

From the transcripts, the *social* helping agencies, routinely associated with support to families with the task of caring for children were positioned in a distinctly different position to agencies occasioned as providing specialist help to families. Whilst participants indicated that it was routine and socially sanctioned to pay attention to one’s own signs and symptoms of ill-health with a view to seeking ‘outside’ *medical* help, this was not the case with *social* family problems (chapter 6). The data suggests that there appears to be a legitimacy to certain forms of ‘outside’ help: educational, medical, expert, but in the case of the knowledge family support agencies hold, this corpus of knowledge can be considered as already and properly held ‘in-house’. It is possible to discuss and consider these findings in relation to the history of ‘ambivalence’ that has surrounded the provision of *social* support to families.

A number of commentators have considered the history of family support services and identified the contradictions that have beset formal social support (Parton et al., 1997; Spratt and Houston, 1999; Jordan, 2000; Spratt and Callan, 2004). Social support has never been legitimised via the provision of universal services to families (unlike medical support); there has always been resounding condemnation of indiscriminate alms giving. Family life in the UK has been premised on *self*-supporting families with support services only aiming to compensate where there is risk that the family cannot achieve this goal. Services have a history of being targeted at a deficient minority, with the intention that within a reasonably short space of time, families would achieve self-maintenance. In 1945 the Family Service Unit described its key role as 'rehabilitation ... to restore the individual to social independence and well-being' (Stephens, 1945, p63). The 'social' has always aimed to improve the lives of children, where parents are deemed as in some way inadequate and individually accountable for their failings (Rose, 1990). 'Problem families' (1950s and 1960s), 'dangerous families' (1970s) and 1980s) 'failing families' (1990s), are the work of 'the social'. Whilst recently there has been a move away from such pathologising descriptors towards a concept of families or children 'in need' of support, that family support services are still targeted (unlike the provision of universal medical care) at a minority continues to reinforce such images. Recent policy developments emphasise that 'every child matters' and aim to strengthen universal support for all children (DfES, 2003). However, the development of new initiatives such as Children's Centres will commence in designated areas of highest need (DfES, 2003). New Labour's welfare programme emphasises the promotion of optimum development for *all* children, but family support continues to be metered out

to spatially designated areas of deprivation (Percy-Smith, 2000; Hutchinson, 2000). Indeed, key features of Labour's modernising agenda are conditional benefits and restricted eligibility to services (Jordan, 2000; Garrett, 2003).

'Stigma' which is seen to arise from the organisation of targeted welfare provision, has been much discussed within the familiar discourse of constructive theorising (Campbell, 2000; Hartwin and Kettle, 2000). In chapter 6, and in contrast, I drew on the work of Sacks: 'Doing being ordinary' (1984). Family support services which continue to be targeted at a minority mark out individuals who use these services as requiring 'extra' support; something *extra*, rather than routine. Sacks highlighted the pervasive organisation of social behaviour around what might be termed 'business as usual' or 'ordinary' activities. In the present study, participants illustrated that any competent member adheres to the social rules that generically circumscribe doing/being a competent parent and this requires that as a parent one draws on one's own resources prior to seeking help. The 'problems' of social isolation, low self-esteem, reduced parenting capacity and so forth, have never achieved the legitimacy of 'medical problems', simply because not everybody is encouraged to seek help in this context. Achieving legitimacy is organised through doing that which *everybody* ordinarily does. It is quite possible that the enduring ambivalence and failure to normalise (universalise) support to families which mediates against help-seeking and maintains family support services as a residual option when all else fails.

Self and ‘insiders’ as better resources

For participants, at the outset, the topic ‘help-seeking’, invoked negative moral implications and for participants a key methodological concern centred on the inferential adequacy of category selections regarding the provision of ‘help’. The treatment of any category as correct or sufficient was contingent on the ability to infer from the category selection positive outcomes of hypothetical help-seeking efforts. Suggestion or selection of child-welfare agencies routinely met calls to account, such as ‘how will that help?’ or indeed, ‘that won’t help’. I stated that participants selected professional categories using knowledge about the work associated with these categories as a resource and that this drew attention to the substantive activities associated with those categories. In the case of child-welfare agencies, given that reference to these agencies routinely invoked ‘child abuse work’ (chapter 9), then, simply on the basis of the work routinely associated with these agencies, they were not selected for help.

Nothing has done so much to damage the social reputation of child-welfare services in the 1980s and 1990s as the move towards investigative practices and the preoccupation with child maltreatment (Thorpe, 1994; 1997; Jack 1997; Spratt & Houston, 1999; Spratt, 2001; Parton, 2006 forthcoming). A number of commentators have suggested that social work has become unrecognisable (Jones, 2001, p552). From the observations made in this study, the legacy of punitive child protection services persists in situated talk. Whilst significant attempts have been made to curb the policing role of social

helping agencies, new initiatives have all been announced with the Victoria Climbié inquiry as the key referent. This is in spite of key studies reporting that only a small minority of families involved with social helping agencies have any intention of harming their children (Thoburn, et al., 1995; Thorpe, 1994; 1996). From the research materials, this continued backdrop of child maltreatment maintains the association of 'child-welfare' with 'child abuse'⁹⁰, such that participants in this study (drawn from a range of social locations), routinely constituted child-welfare agencies as associated with the work of investigation ('knocking on the door', chapter 7) and 'child abuse' (Chapter 9). Given this depiction of the social helping agencies, this suggests that there is a tension between help-seeker and help-provider around accountable action regarding sharing family problems; it is possible to speculate that for the latter it is absolutely the essence of good moral (help-provider) behaviour to share a problem. For the former (help-seeker) it is somewhat foolhardy given these perceived consequences (chapters 7 & 8). From analysis of the data, participants oriented to the substantive activities of child-welfare agencies and suggested that these compound and increase the perceived risks *already* associated with help-seeking, mediating against the development of (hypothetical) of trust relationships. This study suggests that new integrated children's services, sited in venues such as Children's Centres, will have much work to do in attracting the help-seeker; this is certainly an important question for future research.

⁹⁰ In this chapter I have drawn on an article submitted to the journal: 'Health and Social Care in the Community' with the title 'Help-seeking and family support services: Identifying some commonalities in help-seeking decision-making in diverse populations'. In this article I have examined the impact of routine formulations of the work of family support services upon help-seeking decisions.

Re-focused children's services: child protection versus child-welfare

Since the re-focusing debate in 1995, there have been significant attempts to move away from child protection practices towards family support. A key aspect of the new child-welfare paradigm, within the statutory sector, has centred on changing *how* families referred to these agencies are 'routed' once referral has been made (see, for example, Thorpe, et al., (2005) on the re-organisation of duty work around classification). At the point of referral to statutory services, cases are routed away from the gaze of child protection and classified instead as 'child concern', unless serious concerns of actual harm warrant otherwise. Research findings during the 1990s indicated many families referred to services were subject to inappropriate and unproductive (in terms of substantiation) child protection investigations, which damaged relationships between agencies and the communities they served (DOH, 1995). Thorpe (1994) and later with Bilson (1997, 1998) established practice criteria which would ensure that families were routed away from classification as child protection at the point of referral. Instead, families would be diverted to family support provision under the classification 'child concern'. The aim of Thorpe and Bilson's work was to significantly change and improve the helping *relationship* offered to families by statutory services. More families would enter into relationships with social workers defined by *support* rather than protectionist practices. This work has had both national and international impact (Parton and Matthews, 2001).

Research findings, however, particularly those I cited earlier indicating continued problems of family breakdown and low levels of self-referral, caution against simplistic assumptions that this re-classification has worked. Spratt and Callan (2004) have highlighted that there are, in fact, few studies of *how* relationships between service-user and service-provider are working under the new system. Spratt and Callan (2004) studied in detail the experience of 12 families who had experienced child-welfare interventions (families were selected on the basis that they had been classified as child concern at the point of entry to services). They reported mixed responses to this provision, with the authors concluding that overall perception of services remained negative. Not only that, but in a prior study by Tunstill and Aldgate (2000), it was reported that social workers, working with families who were labelled child protection cases, were able to carve out effective relationships in spite of a child protection agenda:

‘Irrespective of the nature and source of referral and the families’ previous attitudes to social workers, it was their relationship with their particular social worker that parents were to return to time and time again during the course of interviews (Tunstill and Aldgate, 2000, p217).

The findings from such studies raise questions about the new dichotomy between ‘good’ child-welfare and ‘bad’ child protection; it may be that simply curbing the investigative aspect of the social worker/service-user relationship is not the crux of the matter. Tunstill and Aldgate’s study which suggests that individual workers can carve out effective individual *relationships* prompt questions about how such individuals are achieving these relationships in spite of the system.

Whilst there has been a move in both the voluntary and statutory services towards the provision of user-friendly services which seek to emulate 'informal' support (chapter 1) such developments have been founded on a weak empirical foundation, given the dearth of studies offering insights into how preferred relationships are organised. To take out the *investigative* aspects of the social worker/service-user relationship has been offered as a solution. However, this solution has left many aspects of the professional helping relationship intact in a number of important ways in both sectors (Chapters 7 and 8).

In the voluntary sector, new services such as 'Sure Start', befriending schemes, or initiatives such as 'Community Mothers' have all sought in some way to emulate 'informal support' and have made purchase on the categories 'mother', 'friend' and so forth. In appropriating this language to inform the development of new user-friendly initiatives, these categories have been used as unexplicated resources. That is, these categories are used *a priori*, without unpacking the situated use or relevance of such category formulations. In using the language of informal support in this way, help-seeking decision-making has simply been condensed along the dimension professional/non professional and this misses how decision-making is organised, so as to provide for the occasioning of a source of support as preferred (Chapters 6, 7 and 8).

In a paper entitled 'Prevention of child abuse and neglect: successfully out of the blocks' Leventhal (2001) outlined a role for 'paraprofessionals' in the work of safeguarding children and supporting families. Paraprofessionals were described as

‘trained non-professionals’, who could ‘ally with families’ and who would therefore be more acceptable to ‘high-risk’ families (Leventhal, 2001, p432). The paraprofessional was supervised by a social worker and tied into the organisational code of the social work profession. Nevertheless, it was presumed that the paraprofessional delivered ‘care ... in the context of a therapeutic and helping relationship’ (Leventhal, 2001, p432). Mixed results of the impact of the paraprofessional were reported and no significant impact upon children’s development or behavioural problems was found. Reporting in the same paper on Home-Start (a family support intervention based on a similar model of home-visiting by paraprofessionals) it was stated that ‘for families enrolled to receive home visiting, it was difficult to maintain the families in the program’ (Leventhal, 2001, p435). The programme aimed to retain ‘at-risk’ mothers of newborn babies on a support programme for three years, but despite this intention, at only six months almost 50% had dropped out.

That new family-friendly initiatives report mixed successes raises the question about the effectiveness of the current organisation of services. The example above is just one of a series of studies that have focused on ‘barriers’ to the effectiveness of family support (Garrett, 2003; Hendrick, 2003; Spratt and Callan, 2004). Evaluative findings of Sure Start, the current government’s flagship programme for families, have also raised significant questions about the effectiveness of this national initiative. Whilst there are clearly issues about how ‘success’ can be measured, the Guardian newspaper, September 13, 2005, reported ‘Sure Start as a whole, failed to boost youngsters’ development, language and behaviour’ (p1).

Social work has long entertained notions of 'befriending' and has aimed to emulate 'informal' support. A significant number of writers suggest some variant of befriending as central to social work practice (Cox, 1993; Bingold, 1995; Featherstone, 1999; Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003; Gray, 2002). Following the re-focusing debate, notions of befriending have gained increased prominence (Gray, 2002; Sears, 2004). The Sure Start programme is based on the use of paraprofessionals as a key resource in engaging communities. The problem is, however, that whilst new family-friendly services appropriate the categories of informal support, such as 'community mothers', this appropriation has lacked any sustained empirical programme of investigation into 'what' it is to be a 'friend' or a 'mother' and so forth, in the context of giving and receiving help. Ruch (2005) has claimed that 'all social work is conducted through the medium of the relationship' (Ruch, 2005, p113) and has emphasised the befriending role for social work, but at the same time has stated that 'definitions' of what constitutes befriending 'are hard to come by' (p113). Without any empirical foundation that might offer insights into how 'friendship' is organised, the *language* of family-friendly services remains just that, a new vocabulary without substance.

Attempts to define 'informal' social work, or social work as befriending, have tended to fall back on case-work theory (Trevithick, 2003; Searing, 2004). Hollis' psychosocial casework has also been resurrected in an attempt to find a new way for family-friendly practices (Hollis, 1994). The problem with all these models is, however, that they are all theorised out of the 'professional-client' relationship. They use and rely on tacit and

unexplicated glosses such as ‘trust’ or ‘reciprocation’, without knowledge of how ‘trust’ or ‘reciprocation’ works in situated relationships (Bingold, 1995; Ruch, 2005). Questions about how is friendship organised, so as to provide for situated invocation of a ‘trust’ relationship are missed, as studies go back to the familiar theoretical models of case-work. There is a certain circularity to the debates which appear and re-appear in the social work literature over time; one study constitutes an elaboration of an earlier study.

The social organisation of preferred helping relationships

‘Before we start thinking about how to improve and optimise artificial inputs in caring activities, we should ask ourselves how things are ‘naturally’. In society’s course, ‘problems’ arise and ‘solutions’ or attempted solutions devised to deal with them ... But what are ‘solutions’ in themselves, where in ‘themselves’ means produced by society before formal responses are devised?’ (Folgheraiter, 2004, p2).

Notwithstanding Folgheraiter’s⁹¹ juxtaposition of the ‘natural’ with the ‘artificial’, he makes an important point. Family support, as a diverse set of activities comprised of practical, financial, emotional support and respite care for children, is already offered by a network of individuals ‘inside’ (where any network exists). Before formal services organise to replicate this support, we need to ask *how* this is done. In this study it has

⁹¹ He is commenting on the Italian system - but this is an international problem.

been possible to identify the following accountable properties of decision-making in talk about 'help-seeking':

- *Constitution of a socially sanctioned order.*
- *Use of prior knowledge of a help-seeking/providing relationship history.*
- *Use of the inferential apparatus relating to symmetry and asymmetry in SRPs.*
- *Management of uncertainty/prediction.*
- *Co-selection of category (help-provider) and activity (constituted problem).*

Whilst it is not possible to generalise from this analysis of situated talk to help-seeking behaviour, these conclusions can provide the stimulus for further research. In situated talk about 'help-seeking', SRPs that were co-produced as preferred category candidates for help, were agreed *in situ* on the basis that they could be considered:

1. Enduring/predictable regarding provision of help.
2. Symmetrically organised regarding obligations to tell/share problems (to each other rather than on account of any factor outside the relationship).
3. Symmetrically organised in terms of interpretation/perception (reciprocal accountabilities influence problem formation).
4. Already affiliated to the problem via relationship or experience/entitlement.
5. Respectful of, and preserving of, a socially-sanctioned, occasioned boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the family.

From this analysis, it is possible raise a series of questions about the current organisation of family support services, with a view to stimulating new areas for discussion and future research.

Short-term or enduring/predictable family support interventions?

The social helping agencies provide in the main short-term support to families. Tilbury (2005) described family support relationships as typically low-intensity services of short-term duration. Statham and Holterman have stated that social services offer short-term crisis measures (2004). Jordan has described social work as legalistic, procedural, formal and arms-length (Jordan, 2001, p539). In this context, social support is seen as something that can be given and taken away, and help is offered in the form of a *service* (for example, a ten-week parenting skills class). Short-term compensatory programmes place the *programme* rather than any helping relationship as central, and this marks a distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ help. For those on the ‘inside’, routinely family and friends, the relationship *is* central to ‘help’. In the UK family support is articulated in the form of plans, commodities or programmes with attendant outcome targets and measures (Garrett, 2003). The present government’s modernising agenda has placed prescribed programmes of intervention with measurable ‘outcomes’ as central. The relationship between service-user and worker is a far lesser issue. There is certainly no mandate for enduring relationships between individual service-users and workers, indeed service-users who seek enduring relationships have been theorised as

‘revolving door’ consumers, with ‘treatment’ programmes to remedy this ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour (Daro and Donnelly, 2002). Equally, professionals who seek to offer enduring relationships⁹² are frowned upon, with training provided in ‘closure’. From this study and given prior knowledge presented as a key resource in situated decision-making, it would be possible to raise questions about whether this places professionals in a weak starting position in contrast to those constituted as ‘inside’ who already provide help.

One might speculate that friendship and family relationships are enduring; this is not to say that these relationships cannot break down, but that they are not initially premised on a discrete time-frame. It is possible to consider that family relationships or friendships are not taken away because one party has ‘got better’; friends make lesser or greater demands on each other, but friendships are not routinely ended because demands have been reduced. Participants in this study rendered prior knowledge of help-giving/help-receiving relationships a central resource in situated decision-making; categories were selected where they invoked close and trusted relationships as the first port of call.

Whilst Thorpe and Bilson’s (1997) child-concern model takes the investigative element out of initial response to families, families still enter a system where they potentially encounter a number of workers who offer short-term support. A family entering

⁹² This does not mean that individual workers will not carve out effective relationships with service users (drawing on what everyone knows about preferred helping relationships), in spite of the organisation and ethos of services.

statutory services is typically allocated to one worker for initial assessment, to a second worker for a more comprehensive assessment, followed by a possible third worker upon allocation to a family support team. In addition, the precedent for various aspects of family support work to be commissioned out to non-statutory agencies provides for the involvement of further professionals. From this study, questions arise as to whether this movement of cases militates against continuity in worker-user relationships and the development of a relationship history/future. This study suggests that further investigation of terms of engagement and the impact of short-term versus longer-term interventions would be fruitful.

New integrated children's services continue to be premised on the effectiveness of short-term interventions, however, the empirical basis which supports the effectiveness of short-term interventions is weak, particularly given that many users of family support services are returning customers. Evaluative studies which report positive findings of family support interventions, frequently cite relationship-based and longer-term interventions as the most effective; yet such studies have failed to impact on the delivery of family support interventions. In a comprehensive study by Manktelow (2003) in Ireland, the author writes that family support workers 'recognised that befriending takes time, involves shared activities together such as shopping' (p52). Manktelow also stated that length of involvement and whether support was ongoing at the time of evaluation, correlated mostly highly with user satisfaction (Manktelow, p152, 2003). Similarly Healy and Meagher (2001) have highlighted the importance of a nurturing worker-client relationship in effecting change. In contrast short-term

parenting skills programmes, which have been much promoted in the UK, report mixed successes with key studies reporting problems with attrition rates and minimal impact (Hughes and Gottlieb, 2004). From this study, 'no-one to turn to' presented as an accountable warrant for seeking help from 'outside' in situated talk. It is possible to speculate that if individuals enter social helping agencies on the basis of 'no-one to turn to', then this divergence in organisation of 'inside' and 'outside' help is problematic, particularly where help is short-term and takes the form of a prescribed intervention. Again such questions, arising from this study, provide fresh avenues of enquiry for future research.

The findings from this study would suggest that universal service provision, such as that offered by a GP where there is some possibility of an enduring relationship of trust, might work better than the short-term targeted interventions. It may be that social helping organisations need to place the helping relationship, rather than programmes, targets and outcomes, as central and consider how services might be organised so as to compliment or extend the organisation of existing preferred relationships. A key aspect of this organisation would be the provision of an open door with the option of returning to re-engage with a worker where effective relationships have been achieved.

Partnership and family support interventions: how do asymmetries matter?

'The problem'

Family support services have a long history of aiming to extrapolate the best from 'informal' support and produce hybrid friend/worker roles. A number of authors have, however, highlighted the inherent tensions in the friend/worker role due to the organisation of obligations within professional services which are at once personal to the service-user, and at the same time professional, to the agency (Hill, 2001; Sheppard, 2004). *How* the asymmetric relationships between worker and service-user matter, however, has been glossed in the familiar discourses of 'care and control' or, 'power and empowerment'. Similarly, 'partnership' models offer generic representations and solutions to such asymmetries (DOH, 1995b). Whilst several authors trade on a vocabulary of reciprocation, sharing or mutuality in articulating models of partnership practice; 'partnership' as a central tenet of contemporary service delivery is founded on a weak empirical base (in terms of *how* effective symmetrical relationships work). Social work practitioners and researchers have reported much difficulty with defining and making 'partnership' operational; this may be in part due to how partnership is conceptualised and defined. Partnership has been defined as both parties having a sense of power and control (but which is not necessarily equal), shared objectives, communication and negotiation (Calder, 1990; 1991; Thoburn and Shemmings, 1995; Petrie and Corby, 2002). In all these formulations 'partnership' is both dictated by and informed by a professional service agenda. Whilst the partnership discourses emphasise

working together to agreed aims and objectives, there is an explicit mandate that the service-user will acknowledge agency concerns ('the problem') and work together on that basis (DOH, 1995b). Assessment, as a starting point in child-care, requires that the service-user understands the agency's formulation of the problem. From this study, participants made clear that a key consideration in talk about help-seeking was the relative and situated nature of problem formation. For participants, the professional accountabilities that were seen to organise the child-welfare worker's formulation of the problem were a particular difficulty. Participants used their knowledge that category incumbency impacted on problem formation to invoke an 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective, with an 'insider' perspective routinely preferred (chapter 8).

One might speculate that the organisation of 'friendship' is defined in and through the occasioned relationship of friendship, which is agreed and negotiated, providing a co-produced context for the hearing and sharing of a variety of problems, again and again. Whilst individual workers, as discussed in chapter 8, may achieve a greater or lesser degree of 'symmetry' in relationships with service-users, the very clear agency agenda which drives both the definition and assessment of 'the problem' in contemporary children's services appears to make inferences about 'problem' misperception routine.

From this thesis, whilst the ascription of SRPs as symmetric/asymmetric is an occasioned matter, for participants the focus of the professional on 'the problem' rather than 'the individual' who presents his or her (version of) the problem, was a significant consideration in decision-making. For participants, preferred helping relationships were

constituted as those where a shared formulation of the problem could be anticipated, or where formulation work was considered as organised according to symmetric accountabilities.

From this study, the topic ‘help-seeking’ invoked reflexively ‘understanding’, as defined and made relevant by the category help-seeker. Family support interventions have at the outset protocols such as eligibility criteria, child protection schedules or risk assessment tools, which all rely on *a priori* formulations of, and reflexively constitute, ‘the problem’ (DOH, 2000). From this study, participants used knowledge of organisational relevancies and how these impacted on problem formulation to reject suggestions of categories of professional help in this context. Professional categories were constituted as governed by accountabilities centring on harms to children, and were routinely suggested as less likely to understand the ‘real’/‘true’ nature of ‘the problem’ and, in the case of child-welfare, participants suggested that there were potentially very serious consequences of such problem misperception. Participants routinely deployed their knowledge about how reality disjunctures are socially and accountably resolved to inform situated decision-making.

Experience and entitlements versus text book knowledge

In selecting sources of help for personal family problems, participants co-produced a preferred category that invoked support as someone who ‘understands’. Categories were constituted as ‘understanding’ on the basis that claims could be accountably made that

the category had direct experience of 'the problem' and that these categories were privileged for help. Whilst it is not possible to generalise from the data to help-seeking behaviour, if selection work takes into account distributional entitlements to experience/understanding (Sacks, 1992), then family and friends, who are already routinely assumed to be affiliated to the problem and to have some shared history with the help-seeker, are again better placed to offer help (as are those with similar backgrounds who can invoke shared experience). This observation raises new avenues of enquiry for future research. Those on the 'outside', unless they can claim some common ground, again may find themselves a residual resource and there is a limited body of research evidence which concurs with this suggestion.

In a survey of parents' wishes regarding family support a large percentage of parents interviewed stated that opportunities to talk with other parents would be most useful (Anderson et al., 2000). Smith (1999) and Pithouse and Tasiran (2000) who reported highest levels of satisfaction in family centres, where users become workers. A number of studies have reported successes with self-help groups and other user-led family support services (Smith, 1999; Cutrona, 2000; Hill, 2001). Studies have also reported success where services have used professionals who have had experienced similar difficulties to the service-users and who disclose this shared experience to service-users (Gray et al., 1997).

Information-sharing versus keeping confidences

In this study, a key methodological concern for participants in talk about help-seeking was the selection of an appropriate and restricted audience for hearing/sharing personal family problems. Problems situatedly constituted as ‘personal family problems’ which impact on the welfare of children were to be kept ‘in’ and not ‘spread around’. These observations raise questions about recent moves to *increase* information-sharing between health and welfare agencies.

Family support services increasingly offer help as a part of a multi-agency response to families. Central to the operation of new integrated children’s services is information-sharing:

‘The CAF will promote more effective, earlier identification of children’s additional needs ... The CAF has been developed for use by practitioners in all agencies so that they can communicate and work more effectively together ... The CAF will encourage greater sharing of information between practitioners’ (DfES, p1, 2005).

Information-sharing is now accepted as central to effective collaborative practices between health and welfare professionals working to support children and families. Whilst there is some clear acknowledgement that information-sharing raises both legal and ethical considerations, these considerations are largely seen as remedied by the recent introduction and implementation of various legislative changes, protocols and

procedures (DfES 2004b). Practitioners who can sensitively explain to families the benefits of information-sharing are seen to be able to remedy any issues arising to do with confidentiality. Whilst the need to explain to families the benefits of information-sharing presents as an acknowledgement that there is something which requires explaining; 'what' this is, however, remains unexplicated. As Wattam has noted, the social organisation of sharing 'private' matters has received little attention during processes of formal service development (1996). Official guidance misses that what can and cannot be shared is dictated not just by procedures and guidelines, but is *socially* organised by shared and accountable processes that circumscribe the sharing/telling of family matters.

In chapter 1, I noted that a number of studies reported perceived lack of confidentiality as a barrier to help-seeking. Although a number of researchers have attempted to stimulate debate on this topic, noting, for example, the distinct under-reporting of intra-familial abuse (Wattam 1996, Van Hook 2000), there has been little sustained debate of issues to do with confidentiality from a *help-seeker* perspective. Whilst such as Bellman (1981) and Wattam (1996) concluded that what gets reported in interaction is circumscribed by social rules of telling and knowing, as Wattam has highlighted, there has been little sustained attention to the 'impediments to telling' (1996, p73). A number of studies have also reported professional difficulty in complying with reporting protocols where these exist, such as in the US (Besharov 1990; Finkelhor 1984; NCCAN 1981). That professionals may share in the difficulties help-seekers face around breaching the social rules that circumscribe telling, indicates the generic

relevance of these social rules which *any* competent member (including children) understands as relevant to sharing certain family matters (Wattam, 1999).

From the research materials, a clear line of demarcation was routinely achieved by participants between SRPs pairs where obligations regarding telling were constituted as reciprocally organised to a finite set and those where obligations were to a potentially infinite set. In terms of professional service development, however, this aspect of the social organisation of telling remains understood only in terms of organisational relevancies, as articulated in policy and legislation such as the Data Protection Act 1998.

The findings from this study concur with studies which attest to the popularity of confidential help-lines, and the observation that calls to confidential help-lines do not appear to converge with direct self-referrals to formal agencies (Wattam, 1996; Akister and Johnson, 2003).

Achieving a 'good second best' position.

In this final section, I will make a number of speculative comments about how child welfare agencies might move forward. These comments are, however, speculative, given the limitations of the data in the study. These comments serve to conclude this social work thesis, suggesting some ways forward for further research work.

Given that situations may arise where an individual has ‘no-one to turn to’ the challenge for the social helping agencies may be how to move from being a candidate for a last resort position to a candidate for a good second best position. The recommendations that follow are based on a premise that the current position of the social helping agencies is not inevitable, rather, the obstacles which family-friendly services face have in part arisen as a consequence of the limited insights the current literature offers about how preferred (family support) relationships *already* work. As Cutrona (2000) notes:

‘Although research on social support has been ongoing for approximately thirty years, we still know relatively little about how to increase social support for those who do not have enough’
(Cutrona, 2002, p104).

This study suggests that it may be difficult to replicate family support from ‘outside’, thus, direct provision to families, aimed at enhancing a family’s ability to share in symmetrical, reciprocal support relationships with family and friends, could be a first option. The present government’s policies of direct support to families via the tax credit system are one method of directly improving parents’ ‘insider’ resources (DOH 2003). However, whilst the current government’s approach to supporting families has lifted families on low wages out of poverty, those receiving long-term state benefits (the population most likely to use formal services) have missed out on such new financial support measures. Only 3% of women who have a child with a disability work, and a

significant proportion of single mothers find accessing employment difficult (Preston, 2005).

From this study it is possible to speculate that if a social actor is low in 'insider' support systems then he or she may have reduced capacity, not only to offer support but also to gain support, given preference for symmetrically organised support relationships. To date there has been little direct empirical analysis of this possibility, although Jordan's work on social capital is relevant (1998). Direct provision in the form of universal child-care and improvements to income levels and housing increase an individual's capacity to participate in relationships of exchange. Research reports that there is an almost 100% uptake of financial support offered by social helping agencies. In addition, there is a high level of demand for practical assistance, particularly around child-care (Smith 1999). Pithouse and Tasiran (2000), in a review of family centre provision, reported 93% uptake of financial support, loaned goods and practical support. Penn and Gough (2002) found that when asked what services parents wanted they were most likely to name practical and financial support.

In terms of increasing networks of preferred relationships, one might also envisage a role for the social/community worker in stimulating and enhancing local leisure opportunities; facilitating local co-operation in the form of, for example, shared transport, community gardens, allotments or self-help groups (drawing on the best of community development/community participation, see Gardner 2002). Gilligan 2000,

2004 has explored the promotion of resilience in children via everyday community support resources such as schools and leisure facilities.

Part of any universal strategy aimed at building or extending support might also include a multi-purpose family resource service, aimed at providing practical services of cooking, cleaning, child-care, washing and ironing. The multi-purpose family support worker could deal with basic household safety; fixing plugs and undertaking repairs. He or she would have knowledge of where to get specialist help if it was required. This service would be a practical service, like getting your house painted. This service would need to be 'ordinary' and available to all. It would be available for purchase like plumbing or electrical work. It is possible that such a service might have a higher uptake than conventional family support services given changing family form and the demands on women from employers outside the home (Featherstone 2004). Family support could also be a service you can get on prescription from the GP or that you can self-refer to in the case of parental overload or temporary incapacity. Such everyday services that all can use and buy would have to be very clearly distanced from work that addresses deviance. Services would not emphasise parent *re*-education or have anything to do with attitudes of inadequacy. The universality of the service would not require special systems to facilitate access or inform local populations; it would be something that everyone knows about and that using implies, 'business as usual'.

From this study, one might speculate that there will always be instances where 'problems' are occasioned as 'not being able to be shared' with family, or are not of a

practical nature. In such instances a confidential/therapeutic service is suggested, and from this study, services would be better placed in the health sector. Whilst this confidential service would not report, it could advise and provide people with clear information about options. Such services would be better placed to attract families with the more 'taboo' and 'private' issues of, for example, drug and alcohol addiction, which is widely reported as correlating with family breakdown (DfES 2003). A number of studies have pointed to the marked absence of therapeutic provision for families, for example, where there are issues of maltreatment (Gray et al 1997). This service would offer both specialist professional help, but equally self-help and user-centred provision. The work of those such as Cooper et al (1995) who have undertaken research into European therapeutic provision, could inform such developments. Such a service would place the relationship as central and provide for the development of 'trust' relationships.

Children's behavioural problems constitute a very high percentage of referrals to social helping agencies; these problems also suggest a specialist service attached to education, which offers something over and above family support. From this study services which offer something different from family and friends, that is, expert or specialist help, (services that *own* a distinct body of knowledge) do not face the same obstacles as services which overlap with provision already in-house.

Above all, agencies providing diverse forms of family support would recognise that problems are situated, occasioned and co-defined (chapter 9) and that the help-seeker has equivalent 'symmetrical' authority to participate in problem formulation and

selection of help. These agencies would be organised around requests for help and take into account the social organisation of help-seeking decision-making- an avenue for further research.

Agencies which offer 'outside' help might explore in more detail the significance of those who present with 'no-one to turn to' as a stimulus to requests for help and further consider listening to 'the problem' as situatedly presented/formulated a central practical activity. In this context, versions become a resource rather than a difficulty to be remedied, with the help-seeker having symmetrical authority of versions. There is much talk of a service-user centred perspective (DfES, 2003), but services that are service-user led would need to start with the service user's version, as made relevant on each and every occasion of presentation. Moving away from help as a *service*, which requires *a priori* formulation of 'problems' and outcomes (and thus comes from 'outside'), might necessitate a flexible relationship-based response to help delivery, responding to 'problems' that cannot be resolved 'inside'.

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