Paper for DISCOURSE & SOCIETY

"Do you think it's a crime?" Building joint understanding of victimisation in
calls for help

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Abstract

Society has a moral obligation to help victims, but who is recognised as a victim is a contentious issue. Social interaction is a key site where shared understandings of victimisation are built. This paper analyses calls to a victim support helpline using conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis. Callers described experiences of crimes to account for requesting help. Call-takers claimed the rights to describe and assess callers' experiences in terms of institutional constraints. Call-takers disavowed the category crime to deny callers' requests and ascribed the category crime to accountably offer help. Participants negotiated their respective rights to describe callers' experiences and determine the kind of help needed. The analyses demonstrate how participants' different understandings of victimisation were consequential for the delivery or withholding of support.

Author biography

Emma Tennent is a doctoral student at Victoria University of Wellington. Her recently submitted thesis in discursive psychology examines identity and help in calls to Victim Support. Her broader research interests include feminism, identity, language and social interaction.

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Introduction

Society has a moral obligation to help victims, but categorising victims is a contentious undertaking. The criminological subdiscipline of victimology largely treats victims as people harmed by crimes (Daigle, 2018). Yet defining crimes is subject to the influence of society's elite and powerful (Quinney, 1972). Feminists have called attention the power dynamics at play when some experiences are legitimised as victimisation while others are rendered invisible (Lamb, 1999). Feminist work has demonstrated how cultural assumptions about victimisation influence the delivery of justice and support. For example, the archetype of the ideal victim harmed by an evil stranger (Christie, 1986) can shape police attitudes (Jordan, 2004), courtroom outcomes (Larcombe, 2002), and media reporting (Venäläinen, 2016). People whose experiences differ from the ideal victim – a relationship with the perpetrator, for example – may be judged or blamed for their experiences (MacLeod, 2016).

Social interaction is a key site where victimhood is claimed, negotiated, and used for practical ends (Holstein and Miller, 1990). Conversation analysis is a powerful tool to interrogate how common-sense knowledge about victims is invoked and used in social interaction. In this paper, I analyse how shared understandings of victimisation are built in calls to a victim support helpline. Using membership categorisation analysis (Sacks, 1972), I interrogate how common-sense knowledge about victims and their experiences is consequential for accessing help.

Membership categories (e.g. victim) are stores of common-sense knowledge about what people are like and how they behave (Sacks, 1972). Using categories reproduces social understandings of what is moral or normal (Stokoe, 2003). Common-sense knowledge about proper behaviour for members of different

categories means those who transgress these norms can be blamed or held accountable. For example, men convicted of domestic violence described their partners' actions (such as being untidy or unfaithful) as outside normative gendered behaviour which implicitly provided a warrant for their violence (LeCouteur and Oxlad, 2011). Likewise, in a police interrogation, a man charged with murder described how his victim propositioned him for sex, invoking the category prostitute (without saying so directly) to implicitly blame her for his actions (Wowk, 1984). Categorisation practices are culture in action (Hester and Eglin, 1997), where members of a culture constitute shared common-sense knowledge about who people are and what they deserve.

In institutional interaction, categories are a resource to make sense of service-seekers and their problems (Schegloff, 1992). Categorising people as victims and events as crimes is central to the work of the criminal justice system. However, establishing the link between activities and categories, and a moral obligation to help is no straightforward matter. Participants are sensitive to the common-sense meanings associated with victims and crimes (see Stokoe, 2010). For example, women reporting rape to police orient to 'rape myths' as common-sense ways to make sense of their experiences and accounted for their behaviour to pre-empt blame (MacLeod, 2016). The common-sense association between victims and passivity means attributions of responsibility in police interviews invalidate women's victim membership and officers' accompanying obligation to help them (Lindholm, Börjesson, and Cederborg, 2014). Thus, categorising victims and crimes is part of the "micro-politics of everyday and institutional life" (Baker, 2000, p. 99).

Categorisation is central to the moral organisation of help. Sacks' (1967) seminal analysis of calls to a suicide helpline demonstrated that paired relationship

categories like husband-wife or friend-friend are "a locus for a set of rights and obligations concerning the activity of giving help" (pg. 203). Participants treated members of relationship categories as the first people to turn to in a search for help, because they have a proper obligation to provide support. In contrast, strangers (like helpline call-takers) do not have the same rights and obligations regarding the provision of help.

Categories for caller and call-taker likewise organise help on the victim helpline. Call-takers are gatekeepers who must determine callers' eligibility before providing help (Heritage and Clayman, 2010). A key task during the call is to accomplish a joint understanding of the caller's experience as an institutionally relevant problem. Generally, people are understood to have primary rights to describe their own experiences, emotions, and thoughts (Sacks, 1984). However, in some cases, other people – such as institutional representatives – may have greater rights to determine who they are, what has happened to them, and what should be done about it (see Heritage & Robinson, 2006).

The tension between different people's rights to assess experience is particularly salient in the case of victimisation. Feminist research has long pointed out that many women do not label their experiences as victimisation – even when what they describe fits legal definitions (see Kelly & Radford, 1990). However, Gavey (1999) argued that researchers should examine how and why women describe their experiences rather than applying legal categories directly (see also Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2014). This is the approach I adopt here. Although my analyses are not limited to cases of violence against women (see Tennent & Weatherall, in press), I examine how callers describe their experiences in their own words. I also attend to

the differences between callers' and call-takers' descriptions, demonstrating how different understandings of victimisation are consequential for access to help.

Data and Method

The data are calls made to a New Zealand victim support service. The service offers free emotional support and practical advice to victims of crime and trauma. Although not a formal part of the criminal justice system, the organisation receives funding from the Ministry of Justice and works closely with Police. A national Contact Service operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Call-takers connect callers with support workers or transfer calls to other service-providers. A pre-recorded message states that calls are recorded for training and research purposes, although callers can request the recording be halted at any point.

In total, 396 call recordings were collected during 2015-2016. Call-takers provided written consent to have their calls included in the sample, and identifying information was anonymised on the sound files to protect confidentiality. Information like names and addresses are represented with pseudonyms on the transcripts. Calls were transcribed calls following conversation analytic conventions (Jefferson, 2004; Hepburn, 2004).

I collected instances of talk where participants described the caller's experience. This paper presents instances where participants described events as crimes. Using membership categorisation analysis (Sacks, 1972), I analysed how different descriptions of events made relevant different membership categories and associated entitlements and obligations. Participants explicitly categorised experiences as crimes using the indefinite article "a crime" (Stokoe, 2009), or used category-resonant descriptions (Schegloff, 2007) like "breaking the law." In some

cases, the category crime was made inferentially available through the naming of predicates like "criminality" or activities like committing an offence or being assaulted. Following Stokoe (2012), I combined this categorical analysis with attention to the sequential unfolding of talk. Using conversation analysis, I examined the sequential position of the description and the action being accomplished. In the analyses below, I demonstrate how descriptions functioned as accounts when callers requested help, call-takers denied requests, and when call-takers made offers and callers rejected them.

Analysis

Categorisation is central to the institutional work of Victim Support. In the first section below, I show how callers describe their experiences as crimes to account for seeking help. The second section demonstrates how call-takers describe callers' problems to accountably deny their requests. In the final section, callers and call-takers use different descriptions to reject and re-issue offers of help. In each case, I analyse how participants orient to their respective rights to describe what happened and how those descriptions matter for gaining access to help.

Requesting help

Callers described their experiences to account for requesting help. Callers' descriptions display their understandings of the kinds of problems the institution recognises as victimisation, and the basis upon which they are entitled to ask for help. In Extract 1, the caller's description occurs in her first turn of talk as part of her request for help.

Extract 1: Samuel 76

```
01    CONTCT:     .hh kia ora: victim support Samuel speaking, ⁱ
02                (0.6)
03    CALLER:     .h oh hi: there >I wonder if you can< he:lp me,
04                =um tch .hh I um I had t- um (0.8) tch I had to
05                report a cri:me um in the >mi- sort of< middle
```

```
06              of the ni:ght um
07   CONTCT:    yeah
08              (0.6) ((background noise))
09   CALLER:    to the polic:e,=um cos I had um my whole bag and
10              wallet (0.2) and passport sto:len. .hhh ah from
11              a hotel? (.) in Durwood?
12   CONTCT:    yeah
13              (0.6)
14   CALLER:    um: and they said that victim support would (.)
15              contact me sometime toda:y >but I-I< don't have
16              a telepho::ne and I don't have (.) .h >anyway<
17              .hh I just wanted to phone because I just wanted
18              to: ask for some advice?
19   CONTCT:    .HH oka:y? ah when you say um advice what ah what
20              sort things were you wanting to know I'll see if
21              I can ah help you in that way,
```

The caller's pre-request, ">I wonder if you can< he:lp me," (line 3) orients to the contingencies associated with her request (see Curl and Drew, 2008). Her following description of her problem attends to some of those contingencies by specifying the help she needs and accounting for her request. Her talk is marked by perturbations including cut-offs and intra-turn silences (line 4) which display difficulty in formulating. She resolves the difficulty with the description, "I had to report a cri:me" (lines 4-5). With this overt categorical reference, the caller claims the rights to categorise what happened as a crime.

The activity of reporting a crime to police can be bound to categories such as witness, victim, or first-responder. The caller's subsequent description of items that were "sto:len" (line 10) specifies both the type of crime (i.e. burglary) and her membership in the category victim. By describing how police referred her to the service (lines 14-15), the caller demonstrates that her categorical membership has been institutionally recognised.

By describing a relevant institutional problem (a crime), and invoking her categorical membership (a victim), the caller establishes her category-bound entitlement to help. The sequential placement of her description – after a pre-request

(line 3) and before the declarative request for advice (lines 17-18) – displays the caller's understanding that her experience is the basis of her entitlement to help. The call-taker aligns as a potential advice-giver (lines 19-21), ratifying the caller's rights to access help from Victim Support.

In Extract 2, the caller likewise describes her experience to account for her request, although the description occurs in a different sequential position. Help is a service provider that specialises in sexual violence support.

Extract 2: Molly 2
```
01    CONTCT:    ↑kia ora ↓victim supp:ort molly speaking,
02               (1.0)
03    CALLER:    oh: h:i um (0.6) can you please put
04               me through to ↑HElp please,
05    CONTCT:    help? >u:::m::::: y:e:s do you have their
06               number on you?
07               (0.8)
08    CALLER:    n::o I do not.=and I don't have enough credit
09               to call them and I was assaulted physically
10               and sexually today:,
11               (0.8) ((background traffic noise))
12    CONTCT:    yep? um: (1.2) coo:l one second I >just need
13               to get their number,<
```

The caller's request to be transferred to Help is formulated as high-entitlement with the modal verb "can" (line 3) and does not orient to the contingencies associated with granting it (Curl and Drew, 2006). The call-taker however, treats the request as non-straightforward with a sound-stretched "um" (line 5). The call-taker's request for information (lines 5-6) displays the expectation that someone who wants to speak to Help would have the number available. The caller denies the request and produces an account as part of her dispreferred response (see Heritage, 1988).

The caller claims she lacks "enough credit to call them" directly (lines 8-9) which accounts for why she has called Victim Support (a free-phone line) to be connected to another service. Her subsequent description, "and I was assaulted

physically and sexually today:," (lines 9-10) is category-resonant (Schegloff, 2007).

In contrast to Extract 1, she does not use the category term crime directly.

Nevertheless, being assaulted is a category-bound activity that invokes her

membership in the category victim of crime. This description accounts for why she

needs help from the sexual violence service provider Help, and why she is entitled to

ask for transfer from Victim Support.

As with Extract 1, the caller displays an understanding that her experience is

the basis upon which she is entitled to request help. The call-taker accepts this and

moves to find the number herself (lines 12-13), aligning with the caller's claimed

entitlement to service. Thus, callers can describe their experiences in ways that

invoke their victim membership and account for seeking help either before (Extract

1) or after their requests (Extract 2). In both cases above, callers use descriptions to

account for seeking help. In the following section, call-takers describe callers'

experiences to deny their requests.

Denying requests

Institutional definitions of victimhood do not always align with callers'

understandings of themselves and their problems. As gatekeepers, call-takers claim

rights to assess callers' experiences in terms of the help available.

In Extract 3, the caller's request for police help displays her understanding of

her problem as criminal victimisation. The call-taker denies this request and

describes her problem to account for doing so.

Extract 3: Samuel 89
```
01    CALLR:    I'[d ] like the police to come and talk to me=
02    CLTKR:      [w-]
03    CALLR:    =so if I could put it into the police's ~hands~
04              .hh .snih
05              (0.8)
06    CLTKR:    o[kay? ]
```

```
07      CALLR:      [can't] they-
08                  (0.2)
09      CALLR:      aren't the victim support (1.2) a- er- got the
10                  police backing them?
11                  (0.4)
12      CLTKR:      .hHH yeah, >.h but< um: what um:: w- s-so you're
13                  on: you're on medication that you don't believe
14                  you should be on, .h[h ah  ] yeah, so um yeah=
15      CALLR:                          [ ye:s ]
16      CLTKR:      =>w-that that< wouldn't (.) wouldn't be something
17                  as such that um that we could consider at victim
18                  suppo:rt because ah .hh it's um: >yeah I know
19                  it's it's< n: not a nice thing for you but it's
20                  not exactly a um: >it's not a m-< not a (.)
21                  cri:me? .hh (it's-)
22                  (0.8)
23      CALLR:      o(h)h I see(h) hhh
```

In responding to the caller's request, the call-taker claims the rights to describe her experience. Although he does not design his description as a request for confirmation (instead continuing to talk through the transition space at line 14), the caller agrees with his description (line 15), asserting primary epistemic rights to describe and assess her own experience (see Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

The call-taker assesses the caller's problem in terms of institutional constraints, claiming that her problem is not the kind of thing "we could consider at victim suppo:rt" (lines 17-18). The call-taker accounts for denying the caller's request by contrasting two different versions of her problem. The first, "it's< n: not a nice thing for you" (line 19) describes the caller's negative stance towards her problem. The second, which parses as *it's not a crime* (lines 20-21), describes the absence of an institutionally relevant category (crime) that would make the caller entitled to Victim Support or police help. The perturbations in the call-taker's talk (lines 19-21) orient to the delicacies of formulating the caller's experience, while nevertheless asserting epistemic rights to assess and categorise her problem (see Heritage & Raymond, 2005). The call-taker orients to his rights to assess the caller's problem as an institutional representative. By deleting the mitigating claim "exactly"

(line 20), his repaired talk directly disavows the problem is a crime, with the category term intonationally marked as the institutionally-relevant criteria missing from the caller's problem.

The caller accepts the call-taker's description (line 23), orienting to his rights to categorise her problem in institutional terms. In this case, the call-taker's description accounts for his denial of help. Thus, different versions of what happened – and participants' differential rights to describe them – are consequential for access to support.

Extract 4 exemplifies how versions of events are consequential for call-takers' gatekeeping activities. The caller's partner has been temporarily removed from the property by police and she is seeking a mediator to be present when he returns. In response to the caller's request, the call-taker articulates the category-bound limits of service.

Extract 4: Monica 16

```
01    CALLR:      um: (0.6) tch .hhhhh I just want to know if
02                there's anybody I can contact that could
03                ~come around here?~
04                (0.4)
05    CALLR:      I'm in nortonburt in moorland, um could come
06                round here (0.2) 'bout nine thiry in the
07                mo:rning to- just be here when he comes and
08                (0.4) talk to him.
09                (0.4)
10    CALLR:      .Shih (1.0) HHuh
11                (1.8)
12    CLTKR:      okay u:m so victim support [only ] supports=
13    CALLR:                                 [.snih]
14    CLTKR:      =victims of cri:me so: um our support workers
15                wouldn't be able to: provide support fo:r
16                your partner?
17                (0.8)
18    CLTKR:      um: but what I could [do is ] have them to=
19    CALLR:                           [(br)HH]
20    CLTKR:      =provide support for you:,=but I'm just trying
21                to ↑che:ck .h I'm just trying to: work how-how
22                I'd put you into our system,
23    CALLR:      .sniHh
24    CLTKR:      so um (.) has he committed an offence? of any
```

```
25              sort!
26    CALLR:    .hhhhhh ~um not that I'm aware of.~
```

The call-taker understands the caller to be seeking help on behalf, and orients to the caller and her partner as having different entitlements to support. In response to the request, she first categorises the organisation's clients as "victims of cri:me" (line 14), then disavows the caller's partner's eligibility for help. This denial demonstrates the call-taker's understanding that the partner is not a victim and thus cannot be a client. Correspondingly, the call-taker's offer to arrange support for the caller (lines 18-20) tacitly categorises her as a victim of crime. However, in a latched turn constructional unit (line 20), the call-taker displays trouble entering the caller into the database, indicating that ascribing her category membership is not straightforward.

By asking if the caller's partner has "committed an offence" (line 24), the call-taker displays an understanding of one version of events that would group caller and partner within the membership categorisation device 'parties to a crime' (see Watson, 1983). If the partner has committed an offence (or crime), he can be categorised as an offender, and the caller as the victim. Despite the caller's earlier description of police removing her partner from the property (not shown), the call-taker displays that she has not understood that description as referring to a crime, which is made explicit with her interrogative (line 24). The caller's negative response (line 26) likewise displays her understanding that the events she has previously described do not constitute an offence.

To accountably offer help to the caller (i.e. allocate her a support worker), the call-taker orients to the need to formulate what happened in a way that provides for the caller's membership in the category victim. In the section below, I examine how

describing callers' problems (particularly, categorising them as crimes) is a resource

for call-takers to render their offers of help accountable.

Offering help

Call-takers' offers of help display their understandings of callers' problems.

Callers, however, do not always agree with call-takers' understandings of their

problems.

Extract 5 occurs two minutes later in the same call as Extract 4. Here, the

call-taker makes explicit her attempts to categorise the caller as someone with an

institutionally relevant problem. Despite previously establishing that an offence had

not been committed, the call-taker attempts to enlist the caller as a client.

Extract 5: Monica 16
```
01   CLTKR:      ˚okay˚
02   CALLR:      .h[hh     h  .shih   ]
03   CLTKR:        [so what I'll do is] I'll put (0.2) I'll put
04               this in our system a:s a: verbal dispute just
05               so that it's kind of got like some sort of
06               criminality to it- to it?
07               (0.2)
08   CLTKR:      .hh (.) [ um ] and then that way we can get a=
09   CALLR:              [yeah]
10   CLTKR:      =support worke:r (0.4) um to make contact with
11               you,
```

Here, the call-taker has arrived at a version of events that accountably

provides for the caller's entitlement to receive support. Categorising the problem as

"a: verbal dispute" (line 4) assigns a police incident code to the event, one of many

call-takers can choose from when enlisting clients for support. This description of

events makes the categories victim and perpetrator available for the caller and her

partner. The call-taker links the predicate of "criminality" (line 6) with this category,

which is tied to the institution's ability to allocate support workers (lines 8-11).

By transforming the caller's experience into an institutionally relevant one,

the call-taker makes her offer of service accountable. Despite the fact the caller did

not describe her experience as a crime (Extract 4), the call-taker orients to her rights as an institutional representative to categorise what happened. This case highlights how institutional categories for callers' experiences are consequential for access to support.

In the following three cases, call-takers offer to transfer calls to police. These offers treat callers as people with relevant problems for police help. Callers use descriptions to account for rejecting these offers, while call-takers use descriptions of callers' experiences to account for re-issuing offers after rejection.

In Extract 7, the call-taker's offer of transfer to the police displays her understanding of the caller's problem as a crime. This presupposition is precisely what the caller takes issue with in her rejection.

Extract 6: Molly 60

```
01   CLTKR:    kia o:ra victim support Molly speaking,
02   CALLR:    .hhh hi I was wonde:ring u:m who do I conta:ct
03             if someone has [ breached (0.2)  ] a::=
04                            [((child's voice))]
05   CALLR:    =protection order!
06             (0.2)
07   CLTKR:    oh yep that would be straight through to the
08             police did you want me to pop you through to
09             them?
10             (1.6)
11   CALLR:    U::M: (0.8) w- (0.2) WEll(h) .h hh (0.4) it's
12             not something urgent (.) but (0.2) it's (0.6)
13             just a breach?
14   CLTKR:    yeah no that would definitely be the pol:ice in
15             terms of the protection order cos that- er-
16             breaking a protection order is: (0.2) seen as
17             breaking the law esse:ntially cos that
18             protection order becomes law against yo:u o:r
19             whoever it is: .h that holds the protection
20             order? .hh but um we don't have the emergency
21             number we've got a like kinda general enquiries
22             line that we can pop you through ↑if you wanna
23             have a chat to them about it?
24             (1.0) ((typing))
25   CALLR:    um is there (police) (0.4) um: (0.2)
26             communica:tions or something?
27             (0.2)
28   CLTKR:    yep that's what it goes through to
```

```
29                    (1.0) ((children's voices in background))
30    CALLR:      oh okay
```

Much like Extract 1, the caller embeds a formulation of her problem in her request for help. Although she uses the non-recognitional reference "someone" (line 3), which can be used to obscure categorical information about the referent (Klein, 2011), protection orders are given by the New Zealand family court for family violence, making inferentially available that the someone is known to the caller and the perpetrator of violence against her (Tennent & Weatherall, in press). The call-taker's offer of transfer (lines 7-9) displays an understanding of the caller's problem as a straightforward police matter.

However, the caller rejects the offer and describes her problem in her account. She first disavows that it is "something urgent" (line 11). She then transforms her initial description into categorisation, "it's (0.6) just a breach?" (lines 11-12) including the minimising token "just" to disavow that her problem is serious. This reformulation displays the caller's understanding that talking to police is an inapposite response for problems like hers.

Despite the caller's rejection, the call-taker reasserts her offer with the upgraded claim, "yeah no that would definitely be the pol:ice" (line 14). The call-taker accounts for why the caller's problem is a relevant police matter with the category-implicative description, "breaking a protection order is: (0.2) seen as breaking the law" (lines 16-17). This description makes the category crime inferentially available for the caller's situation (see Schegloff, 2007). The use of the indefinite article "a" (line 16) formulates a general rule about protection orders that accounts for the call-taker's recommendation in this specific circumstance (cf. Stokoe, 2010). By describing events in this way, the call-taker orients to her rights (as an institutional representative) to categorise the caller's experience.

Notably, the call-taker claims the problem is "seen as" (line 16) a crime,

drawing attention to the process of category ascription in a similar manner to Extract

5. This description suggests that category ascription of the caller's problem is not

equally available to all cultural members – after all, the caller does not see her

experience as a crime! Instead, it is institutional representatives (like the call-taker)

who can 'correctly' see the caller's experience as breaking the law, a problem for

which police help is necessary and legitimate.

In Extract 7, the caller orients to the call-taker's rights to describe her

experience, directly asking for his opinion in response to his offer of help.

Extract 7: Samuel 83
```
01    CLTKR:     .HH so um: if you feel you could benefit from ah
02               emotional support that's absolutely fi:ne we can
03               ah .h make a referral for you, .HH but ah: (y-) I
04               would definitely encourage you to report what
05               they did to the polic:e,
06               (1.0)
07    CALLR:     .h do you (.) do you think it is a cri:me or do
08               you think it's just a: a malfunctioning person
09               .hh (.) just taking advantage of somebody,
10    CLTKR:     .HH (n-) we[ll I] think um you you (.) .H you:=
11    CALLR:              [cos-]
12    CLTKR:     =entrusted somebody to look after your house
13               while you were away, .hh and you um you had a
14               right not to expect anything broke:n,=and not to
15               expect ah anybody that wasn't supposed to be there
16               to go in, .h
17               (1.0)
18    CLTKR:     .H [so ] no I think (.) I think you've got every=
19    CALLR:        [yep]
20    CLTKR:     =right to >you know y-< you- as you say you were
21               taken advantage of and you were violated, so ah
22               .hh >I'd I'd I'd< very much encourage you to talk
23               to the police yes,
24               (1.2)
25    CALLR:     thank you,
```

The call-taker treats the caller as a potential client by offering referral (lines

1-3) but recommends she "report what they did to the polic:e," (lines 5-6). This

advice refers indexically to "what they did" based on the caller's earlier description

(not shown). For the call-taker, the nature of the caller's problem warrants seeking police help. Rather than accepting or rejecting the advice however, the caller provides the call-taker with two versions of her problem formulated as yes/no interrogatives. By asking the call-taker for his opinion, the caller defers to his rights to determine how to understand her experience.

The first option "do you think it is a cri:me" (line 7) displays the caller's understanding of a relevant problem for police help. If she has experienced a crime, the membership categorisation device, 'parties to a crime,' mean the person responsible can be categorised as the perpetrator and she as the victim (see Watson, 1983). Victims have the category-bound right to report crimes to police. The second version of her problem, "do you think it's just a: a malfunctioning person .hh (.) just taking advantage of somebody," (line 7-9) makes different inferences available about her category membership and rights to help. If the caller's experience is unfortunate rather than criminal, the person responsible is just "malfunctioning" and she is merely "somebody", she lacks the category-bound rights to report what happened to police.

Rather than selecting either of the caller's options, the call-taker describes her experience in a different way to invoke her moral rights to seek help. He describes how she "entrusted" her home to someone (line 12), invoking a trust-based relationship between the caller and house-sitter. That relationship is a locus of rights and obligations, whereby the caller (as homeowner) had the right to expect her property unharmed and her rules upheld (lines 14-16). The fact the house-sitter broke this agreement amounts to the caller being "violated" (line 21). This description accounts for the call-taker's renewed recommendation to contact police. Notably however, he advises she "talk to" police (lines 22-23) rather than report the crime,

deferring to the police's rights to judge events as crimes, while nevertheless arguing

for her entitlement to seek police help.

Although the caller in Extract 7 orients to the call-taker's rights to describe

her experience, in the final case below, participants display competing

understandings of the events in question.

Extract 8: Adrian 10
```
01    CLTKR:    so what I'm going to do (0.6) is (0.4) I'm
02              going to give a call to the police,
03              (0.8)
04    CLTKR:    I'm [g-]
05    CALLR:        [mm]
06    CLTKR:    <I'm gonna expla:in the situation. and then I'm
07              gonna (0.2) put you through so you can talk to
08              the police.>
09              (0.4)
10    CLTKR:    alright?
11              (1.2)
12    CALLR:    No: not no:w. not yet ah because er .hh I'm a
13              (.) Indian and we can't go to the poli:ce,
14              .h [(and if] I do:) they will ki:ll me?=they=
15    CLTKR:       [ why-  ]
16    CALLR:    =(already) kill me,
17              (0.6)
18    CLTKR:    >sorry< (0.4) who is going to: (1.4) so (1.2)
19              who is threatening to (0.2) kill you,
20              (1.2)
21    CALLR:    like threatening to kill me <my husba:nd.=he
22              said if I was in India they will ki:ll me,
.
.              ((13 lines omitted – clarifying the threat))
.
35    CLTKR:    miss. (0.2) so (0.2) <because your husband has
36              threatened to kill you>,
37              (0.4)
38    CLTKR:    that's a s[erio]us crime,
39    CALLR:             [yeah]
40    CALLR:    yeah(h),
41              (0.4)
42    CLTKR:    <what you should do [ is you sho- > ]
43    CALLR:                        [but people don't] believe
44              me,=he's a (guru), .h he's a: he's a politics
45              person, he's a business man,=big business man,
46    CLTKR:    miss
```

After establishing that the caller has not yet reported a sexual assault to

police (not shown), the call-taker offers transfer (lines 1-2), with subsequent

elaborations in response to a lack of uptake (lines 4-10). His offer displays his

understanding of the caller as a victim of crime who is entitled to police help based on the details of "the situation" (line 6) she has previously disclosed.

However, the caller rejects the offer and categorises herself to account for doing so. With the self-categorisation, "I'm a (.) Indian" (lines 12-13), she indicates why she is unable to accept the offer. Using the plural pronoun "we" to speak as a category member, she specifies the relevant predicate, "we can't go to the poli:ce" (line 13) and claims that if she were to accept the call-taker's offer, she could be killed for doing so (lines 14-16). In contrast to Extract 6, the caller categorises *herself* rather than her problem to account for rejecting the offer of help.

Instead of accepting the caller's rejection, the call-taker uses her disclosure of threats to begin a modified offer for the same kind of help (see Davidson, 1990). After clarifying the threat (not shown), he describes the caller's problem as "your husband has threatened to kill you" (lines 35-36), and categorises this as "a serious crime," (line 38). This shift from description to categorisation displays his understanding of what activities constitute serious crimes (see Stokoe, 2009). By formulating the caller's experience as a serious crime, the call-taker reasserts her entitlement to seek police help. His advice about what she "should do" (line 42) is based on his categorisation of her experience, making it projectable as a subsequent offer of transfer to police. The caller displays her understanding of this projected action, producing another rejection before he has finished speaking (lines 42-43).

The caller next categorises her husband to account why she cannot turn to police. She claims that "people don't believe me," (lines 43-44) and ties this attribute to his membership in the categories "a politics person" and a "big business man," (lines 44-45). For the call-taker, the caller's disclosure of a serious crime justifies her

seeking police help. For the caller – regardless of the criminal nature of her experiences – her and her husband's category membership invalidates her seeking any kind of help. It is not only police, but "people" (line 43) in general who doubt the caller. The link between gendered violence and disbelief has long been documented by feminists (Jordan, 2004), and the caller's category-based account presents her fear of disbelief as culturally recognisable.

Although in some cases, categorising callers' experiences as crimes can legitimate callers as victims entitled to help (e.g. Extracts 5 and 7), in this case, the call-taker appears to disregard the caller's own understanding of her experience. Although for an institutional representative, the link between a crime and seeking police help may be straightforward, feminist research has shown that seeking help is not always so simple. Women who have experienced domestic violence and do not speak English as a first language (like this caller) often face barriers in seeking support (Bhuyan and Senturia, 2005). In this case, the call-taker offers transfer once more before the caller hangs up (not shown). The call ultimately ends without the caller accessing help from police *or* Victim Support, demonstrating the consequential nature of participants' negotiation of how to understand what happened and how it should be responded to.

Discussion

Ascribing categories to callers' problems is central to the practical organisation of help-seeking. Both callers and call-takers used the category crime to make sense of callers' experiences and determine how help should be given. Participants negotiated what experiences could be understood as crimes and who had the rights to describe callers' experiences. Although people are ordinarily understood

to have privileged rights to define their experiences (Sacks, 1984), institutional interactions like these helpline calls are characterised by a tension between participants' respective rights to determine the nature of the help-seeker's experience and what should be done for them (Heritage & Clayman, 2010).

Callers described their experiences in ways that displayed understandings that access to help was contingent on a relevant institutional problem. Referring to the category crime either directly (Extract 1) or implicitly (Extract 2) was a resource for callers to present relevant problems and account for seeking help. In these cases, callers claimed the rights to categorise their experiences and ask for help.

In other cases, call-takers oriented to their rights as institutional representatives to describe callers' experiences and determine how they should be helped. When call-takers denied callers' requests, they denied callers had relevant problems (Extract 3) or identities for support (Extract 4). These denials invariably countered positions callers had taken by calling – namely that they were victims entitled to support.

Call-takers also oriented to their rights to describe callers' experiences when making offers. In some cases, call-takers made explicit the process of category-ascription (Extract 5), demonstrating how relevant institutional categories were necessary for support to be provided. Call-takers oriented to institutional representatives' abilities to interpret callers' experiences as crimes – even when callers might not describe or understand them in this way (Extracts 6 and 7).

The tension between callers' and call-takers' respective rights to describe experiences demonstrates differences between common-sense cultural understandings of victimisation and institutional definitions and processes.

Concluding remarks

In calls to Victim Support, the category crime was a resource for participants to understand experiences as victimisation. However, the question of which experiences are recognised as crimes is a site of political struggle (Lamb, 1999). Calls to Victim Support provide grounded examples of members' methods for understanding what experiences constitute victimisation. In some cases, call-takers understood callers as victims of crimes, while callers understood their problems in more mundane ways. In other cases, callers treated themselves as victims, while call-takers had quite different stances on their problems. These different understandings were consequential for the provision or withholding of support.

Victimisation robs people of control. One way to counteract the harm of victimisation is to honour people's understandings of their experiences in their own words (Gavey, 1999). Although categories for people and their experiences may be necessary for institutional processes such as the workings of the criminal justice system, attributing categories to others can exert social control (Holstein & Miller, 1990). Institutional representatives may have greater knowledge about what events constitute crimes, but it is important to understand how and why callers might describe their experiences differently. When offering support, institutional representatives must take callers' understandings of their experience into account to provide help in a sensitive manner.

This paper contributes to the interactional analysis of victimhood by explicating the interactional processes by which the categories victim and crime are ascribed to people and events (Holstein and Miller, 1990). The analyses shed light not only on the operation of help-seeking in this institutional context, but on broader

questions around what constitutes victimisation and on what basis victims are

entitled to support.

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[i] "kia ora" is Te Reo Maori greeting used within New Zealand English. This is the standard greeting call-takers are trained to use.