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Beyond neutrality: Professionals' responses to clients' indirect complaints in a Therapeutic Community for people with a diagnosis of mental illness

MARCO PINO[1] AND LUIGINA MORTARI[2]

(1) University of Nottingham, UK; (2) University of Verona, Italy

Abstract

Previous research has evidenced that in different institutional settings professionals are cautious when responding to clients' indirect complaints and tend to avoid siding either with the clients/complainants or the complained-of absent parties. In this article we use the method of Conversation Analysis to explore professional responses to clients' indirect complaints in the context of a Therapeutic Community (TC) for people with diagnoses of mental illness in Italy. Although the TC staff members sometimes display a neutral orientation toward the clients' complaints, as is the case in other institutional settings, in some instances they take a stance toward the clients' complaints, either by distancing themselves or by overtly disaffiliating from them. We argue that these practices reflect the particular challenges of an institutional setting in which professionals engage with clients on a daily basis, have an institutional mandate of watching over them and are responsible for their safety. According to this interpretation, staff members' non-neutrality toward clients' complaints can be seen as a way of defending against the possibility, raised by the clients' reports, that the staff members might be involved, albeit indirectly, in courses of action that have harmed or might harm the clients.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis; indirect complaints; mental health; neutrality; rehabilitation; Therapeutic Community

1. Introduction

In healthcare encounters clients commonly report their problems (Robinson and Heritage 2005; Ijäs-Kallio *et al.* 2010) in order to obtain professional assistance and support. Such reports sometimes embed elements that convey indirect complaints, through which clients bring to professionals' attention mistreatments that they have suffered in the past and the extent to which responsibility for such mistreatments can be attributed to some absent person or organization. Previous studies have found that service-providers often withhold from taking a stance toward clients' indirect complaints, specifically as regards evaluating or otherwise commenting on the misconduct of absent third parties. In this article we expand on this issue by examining a healthcare setting where the professionals do not confine themselves to neutral responses to the clients' indirect complaints. Specifically, we examine the communication practices through which the professionals of a Therapeutic Community (TC) address the indirect complaints of their clients (people with a diagnosis of mental illness) and we ask how these practices relate to the professionals' institutional mandate within the TC.

After reviewing previous studies on complaining in interaction, we show that the TC professionals sometimes do adopt a neutral stance toward the TC clients' indirect complaints. Nevertheless, in other cases, they distance themselves from or even overtly disaffiliate from the clients' indirect complaints. After examining these practices in detail, we argue that they are designed to deal with some specific challenges that are inherent in the TC professionals' institutional mandate.

2. Literature review

Complaining can be defined as the activity of expressing 'feelings of discontent about some state of affairs, for which responsibility can be attributed to "someone" (to some person, organization or the like)' (Heinemann and Traverso 2009: 2381). This definition captures two aspects that appear to be involved in the construction of complaints as social actions: personal relevance and moral relevance. Personal relevance means that the reported events had some impact on the complainant's life which can be conveyed through expressions of irritation, frustration (Stokoe and Hepburn 2005) or indignation (Drew 1998). Moral relevance can be conveyed either through explicit attributions of responsibility (Drew 1998), or through reports that embed elements whose complaint-implicativeness is left to the recipients to infer (e.g. 'negative observations'; Schegloff 1988). In this article we focus on indirect complaints; that is, on complaints in which the complained-of 'someone' is an absent party.

Previous research has shown that professionals can be reluctant to attend to clients' indirect complaints (Heinemann and Traverso 2009). As regards healthcare interactions, Ruusuvuori and Lindfors' (2009) research on patients complaining about previous treatments shows that 'professionals generally adopt a neutral stance towards the issue complained about' (2422), by ignoring the complaint-implicative aspects of patients' problem descriptions. The practice of maintaining a neutral stance towards clients' indirect complaints appears to find its rationale in the more or less explicit norms of impartiality and caution that inform much professional practice. By ignoring the complaints embedded in their clients' problem descriptions, the professionals can avoid being heard as siding with the clients against the complained-of third parties (or *vice versa*). By maintaining a neutral stance, healthcare professionals can convey that it is not their business to attend to the personal and moral implications carried by clients' reports and that they should confine themselves to maintaining a practical, solution-focused attitude *vis-à-vis* clients' problems.

Voutilainen *et al.* (2010) argue that in healthcare interactions 'pockets of non-neutrality' can be found, and they specifically examine a case in which a psychotherapist affiliated with a patient's complaint against a third party. They argue that the therapist's display of non-neutrality served his professional agenda (specifically, challenging a patient's dysfunctional belief about herself). In this article, we also explore how non-neutrality can be functional to pursue particular institutional agendas but, unlike Voutilainen *et al.*'s study, we examine how this can be achieved through displays of non-affiliation towards clients' indirect complaints. Also relevant to our inquiry is a study in which Antaki *et al.* (2002) analyse departures from neutrality in the reception of intellectually-disabled people's answers to interview questions and give a specific instance in which an interviewee's complaint is neutralized through a general observation that works as a challenge. Jingree *et al.* (2006) show that care staff can ignore intellectually-disabled people's complaints in pursuit of 'appropriate responses' to their questions. Although these studies describe ways in which care staff can depart from professional neutrality in response to clients' complaints, their primary empirical focus is not on complaint sequences as such. Finally, Heinemann (2009) shows how in the context of home-help visits for elderly people a care recipient's complaints are overtly rejected by her caregivers. She argues that through these responses and other communication practices 'caregivers consolidate institutional roles and cement their collegial relationship' (Heinemann 2009: 2448). In our study we extend this line of inquiry by exploring staff members' disaffiliative responses to clients' indirect complaints in a different healthcare setting: a TC for persons with diagnoses of mental illness.

3. Data and method

Data for this study were collected in a Therapeutic Community (TC) for people diagnosed with mental disorders, in Italy. This TC can accommodate twelve people (henceforth 'clients'), the majority of whom are diagnosed with different types of psychosis. The clients take part in rehabilitation activities aimed to teach or reinforce abilities for the management of everyday life, which might have been compromised by mental illness or by processes of social exclusion (for an overview, see Crescentini *et al.* 2004). The data comprise approximately four hours of audio-recorded meetings between the TC staff members and the clients. Permission to record and publish data was granted by all participants. All identifying details were modified in the transcripts included in this paper.

The recordings were transcribed using a modified version of the notation devised by Gail Jefferson (see Schegloff 2007), which makes it possible to capture features of speech delivery (aspects of intonation, emphasis, volume of voice, sound-stretching) and temporality (pauses and overlaps) (see Appendix). The transcripts in this paper are presented in a double line: original Italian and English idiomatic translation.

The method employed in this study is Conversation Analysis (CA), an approach for the analysis of interaction widely used in research on healthcare settings (Heritage and Maynard 2006). CA makes it possible to describe how participants employ talk and other semiotic resources to produce the social actions – such as problem-presentation, advice, remedy-proposal and so on – upon which the delivery of healthcare services is built. A distinctive mark of CA is attention to how the format of participants' practices and their positioning in the sequential organization of the interaction provide for the understanding of the kind of actions that they implement.

4. Results

The clients' complaints are embedded in turns-at-talk that also perform other interactional work (Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009), such as reporting a trouble (see Excerpts 1 and 4) or responding to an initiating action (such as an inquiry) by the staff members (see Excerpts 2 and 3). In what follows we first analyse instances in which the staff members maintain a neutral stance, and we subsequently describe two different practices through which they depart from neutrality in response to clients' indirect complaints. We show that the staff members depart from neutrality when they orient to and deal with the moral implications (i.e. attributions of responsibility for some wrongdoing) embedded in the clients' reports of events, which make them hearable as complaints. Furthermore, we show that the two different practices through which the staff members depart from neutrality have different consequences for how the more personal dimension of the clients' reports (e.g. how they felt in the complained-about events) is received.

4.1. Maintaining a neutral stance toward the complaint-implications of clients' reports

The TC staff members can avoid attending to the moral attributions that the clients' reports of events possibly convey (and, hence, to their complaint-relevance). In Excerpt 1a a client, a woman called Dina, reports a recent event to two staff members, specifically an educator called Barbara (not speaking in this excerpt) and a nurse called Massimo. There are some co-present clients who, with the exception of a woman called Lidia, do not intervene. Dina recounts that she has recently met her ex-husband, who has shown her a document describing her as having a learning disability (line 3) or a form of inability (lines 14–18). The focal points for our analyses are in lines 25 and 33 (marked with arrows).

Excerpt 1a: Massimo, Dina and and Lidia

01	D:	*io son andata::::eh sono uscita*
		I went::::eh I went out
02		*con ((ex marito)).=m'ha:n f-*
		with ((ex-husband)).=the:y s-
03		*m'ha fatto vedere questa ca:rta,*
		he showed me this pa:per,
04		*che:::=m:h- (0.3) passo da deme↑::nte!*
		tha:::t=m:h- (0.3) I pass off as deme↑::nted!
05		(0.8)
06		*non gliel'ho firma:ta e io non*
		I didn't si:gn it for them and
07		*mi ricordo di averla firma:ta.*
		I don't remember having si:gned it.
08		(1.7)
09		*Massimo?*
10	M:	*no ma spiegaci bene*
		no but explain us better
11		*che non ho capito.*
		because I didn't understand.
12		(0.7)
13		*allora [loro-]*
		so [they-]
14	D:	*[la] raccomanda:ta*
		[the] le:tter
15		*c'era scritto che io*
		it said that I
16		*noèn-n::::=e::::h (.) <n:on vede*
		don::::=e::::h (.) <((she)) doe:sn't see
17		*gli euro come sono*
		the Euros as they
18		*fa::[:tti.>*
		a::[:re.>
19 ??	(L:)	[((*laughs*))------[--------
20 ??		*[.hhhh*
21		(0.4)
22	M:	*.hh ma [( )*
		.hh but [( )
23	D:	*[che: mi*
		[that I
24		*sba:gl[io.]*
		get it wro[:ng.]
25	M: →	*[(h)e.]=.hhhh*
26		*non ti sei fatta dare una*
		didn't you ask for a
27		*[copia?]*
		[copy?]
28	L:	*[z : : : i]::rò::::?*
29		(0.3)
30 ??		([ )
31	D:	*[↑no:::*
32		(0.9)
33	M: →	*e se::: gliene chiediamo*
		and i:::f we ask them
34		*una copia si può*
		for a copy is it possible

35 *averla secondo- (.)*
to have it according- (.)
36 *ce la da:nno?*
will they gi:ve it us?

Dina's announcement in lines 1–4, expanded in lines 6–7, seems ambiguous as to its possible import. It might be heard as (1) a complaint about some organization (possibly a medical board) for issuing a certificate that describes her as having a form of inability, with the related concern that people start regarding her as an incompetent person (*'I pass off as deme↑::nted!'*); (2) a complaint about her family members for asking her to sign some documents (lines 6–7); (3) a bad news announcement (Maynard 1998) accompanied by an expression of concern about an ongoing legal procedure of which Dina might have been unaware (lines 6–7). There is evidence that this announcement might present the recipients with interpretive problems: after a lapse (line 8) and after Dina solicits Massimo's response (line 9), Massimo provides for Dina to clarify her announcement and claims insufficient understanding of it (lines 10–11). After a gap (line 12), Massimo starts to solicit Dina's response with the production of a candidate elaboration (line 13) and aborts it when Dina starts in overlap to provide the required elaboration (line 14), specifically by detailing the content of the document (now referred to as a *'letter'*, which reportedly describes Dina as unable to correctly appraise the value of the Euro currency). This elaboration might consolidate the third of the possible interpretations of the announcement outlined above: an expression of concern for an inauspicious event which escapes Dina's control. Because it is articulated in the context of a TC meeting, this trouble description might also be heard by the TC staff as a request for help. As a matter of fact, the latter understanding of Dina's description seems to inform Massimo's response. After some laughter by another client (line 19), possibly occasioned by Dina's 'dramatic' tone of voice, and a pause, Massimo starts and abandons a turn, overlapped by Dina's increment to her previous description (line 23). Overlapping its completion (line 24), Massimo produces a laughter token and asks whether Dina requested a copy of the document. After Lidia's non-intelligible (at least to us) verbal production in line 28, Dina responds negatively (line 31). Then after a gap, Massimo inquires about the possibility of obtaining a copy of the document (line 33). By so doing, Massimo seems to address Dina's announcement in a way that is typical of service encounters (Jefferson and Lee 1992 [1981]), with a focus on the practical implications of her report (the implication being that, after examining a copy of the document, the TC staff might be in a better position to offer assistance to Dina). By selecting this tack, Massimo avoids addressing the moral aspects embedded in Dina's report, such as the complainable matter of being treated as an incompetent person. That a complaint was at least one of the *possible* foci of Dina's announcement in lines 1-4 is evidenced in Excerpt 1b, which is a direct continuation of Excerpt 1a.

Excerpt 1b: Dina and Massimo

37 D: *sì:: sì: penso [di ↑sì,*
yes:: yes: I think [↑so,
38 ?? [( )
39 D: *perché ho #f:atto# una figu::ra=*
because I #m:ade# a foo::l of myself=
40 *=con mio fi:glio di una sce:ma.*
=with my s:on.
41 L: *(h)e*
42 M: *ma no dai. >allora< per la Di:na*
but no come on. >so< for Di:na
43 *perché: (0.2) in questo*
because: (0.2) at the
44 *momento ci sono un po' di*
moment there are some
45 *problemi di gestione .hhh*
problems with the management .hh
46 *della sua eredità:, perché lei (0.7)*
of her inheritance:, because she (0.7)
47 *aveva: parecchi:::m:::h (0.9)*
had: a lot of:::m:::h (0.9)
48 *insomma l'era una signo:ra,*
well she was a wealthy la:dy,
49 *.hhhhh e:::=m:::h .hhhhh (.)*
.hhhhh and:::=m:::h .hhhhh (.)
50 *è sta- (0.2) (e) si*
it was- (0.2) (and) it
51 è pensato di fargli (.)
was thought to give her (.)
52 *un <tu↑tore,> ((staccato)) (0.6)*
a <tu↑tor> ((staccato)), (0.6)
53 *un amministratore di soste:gno.*
a le:gal guardian.
54 *.hhh ma l'amministratore (di)*
.hhh but the legal
55 *sostegno (.) si occuperà*
guardian (.) will take care
56 *<s:o:lo dei suoi:::> (0.4)*
<o:n:ly of her:::> (0.4)
57 *be:ni. dei suoi so:ldi.*
ass:ets. of her mo:ney.
58 (0.7)
59 *non andrà a::=m:h (0.9)*
he won't::=m:h (0.9)
60 *non sarai delegittimata*
you won't be delegitimized
61 *in-ne-nel:- (.) nei >tuoi:*
in-in-in the:- (.) in >your:

62		*diritti, nei tuoi doveri Dina.<*
		rights, in your duties Dina.<
63		(0.4)
64	D:	*m:::[:h.*
65	M:	*[non è una*
		[it's not a
66		*<interdizione.> ((staccato))*
		<disqualification.> ((staccato))

In line 37, Dina responds affirmatively to Massimo's inquiry and she goes on to detail a negative consequence of the reported event (lines 39–40). This expansion to the earlier trouble description might add further complexity to an already ambiguous report, which might now be heard as a self-deprecation of sorts. Nevertheless, it might also be heard as renewing and upgrading the complaint-aspect of the original announcement, insofar as it stresses that the document caused Dina to appear as having a learning disability in the eyes her son. By describing this inauspicious outcome, Dina can be heard as complaining about whoever was responsible for issuing the document. After another laughter token by Linda, Massimo responds in line 42. We will elaborate on some features of this response later in the article, but for present purposes we focus on the fact that it displays Massimo's orientation to the complaint-implications of Dina's announcement. After responding to Dina's expression of concern ('*but no come on*'), Massimo goes on to explain Dina's situation to the co-present clients and eventually to reassure Dina against the possibility of a legal disqualification (lines 65–66). By invoking this dreaded issue, Massimo appears to orient to Dina's report as a complaint about being ascribed the status of an incompetent person. This is particularly evident in lines 50–51, where Massimo's reference to an agent (left unidentified through the use of the passive verb form) who was responsible for initiating the legal action (which will lead to appointing a legal guardian) suggests that Massimo is orienting to Dina's report as implying that such an agent might have caused her some harm.

Dina's report thus appears to be heard as making available a complaint about an instance of untoward treatment. This example illustrates that a TC staff member can avoid addressing the complaint-implications of a client's report (see the target utterances in lines 25 and 33) and, instead, respond to another of the actions possibly conveyed by the client's report (such as an expression of concern or a request for help). A payoff of this practice is to avoid siding with either the complainant or the target of the complaint and, hence, to maintain a degree of professional neutrality. The example also illustrates that a TC staff member can attend to the complaint when the client expands it.

In Excerpt 2, a discussion is in progress about some shopping that the clients have recently done in preparation for an upcoming vacation. In line 1 Massimo involves Daniele (a client) in recounting what he bought for himself.

Excerpt 2: Massimo and Daniele

01	M:	*tu Daniele cosa ti ↑sei compe↓rato*
		Daniele what did you ↑buy your↓self
02		(0.7)
03	D:	*(magliette)*
		(t-shirts)
04		*(ho) dovuto*
		(I) had to
05		*far ta:nto::, e: mio padre*
		do a lo:t::, and: my father
06		*mi ha detto su?*
		told me off?
07		(0.7)
08		*perché m'ha comprato le camicie,*
		because he bought me the shirts,
09		*che a casa ne ho un*
		when at home I have a shitload of
10		*fotti[o.*
		the[m.
11	M:	*[↑no: >no no no.<*
12		*quelle che hai a casa*
		the ones you have at home
13		*di' che le butti via.*
		you tell him to throw them away.
14		(0.5)

Massimo's inquiry occasions Daniele's report in lines 3–6, which can be heard as complaint-implicative. '*(Ho) dovuto far ta:nto::*' (translated literally as '*I had to do a lot*') is an idiomatic expression which might mean that Daniele had to insist a lot to convince his father to buy him some shirts. His father reportedly bought the shirts but also told Daniele off (line 6). After a gap in which no response is forthcoming, Daniele adds that his father complained about having to buy the shirts (lines 8–10). The import of Massimo's response (starting in line 11) can be understood in the context of the ongoing activity, which seems aimed to positively reinforce the fact that the clients purchased some new clothes. By reporting his father's conduct in response to Massimo's inquiry about the shopping, Daniele seems to propose that his father tried to obstruct a course of action that is valued by the TC staff (his father reportedly claimed that there was no need to buy new shirts because Daniele already has quite a lot of them at home, lines 9–10). In this respect, he might be trying to co-implicate the staff members in a complaint about his father (Drew

and Walker 2009). Massimo avoids siding with either Daniele or his father. After the multiple '*no*' response in line 11, Massimo issues a command, which treats Daniele's father's behaviour as an obstacle to the fulfilment of the institutional agenda of renewing the clients' wardrobes. In a way similar to in Excerpt 1a-b, Massimo deals with the client's report in a way typical of many service encounters; that is, as conveying a problem-to-be-solved, and he avoids attending to its more moral (complaint-implicative) relevancies. Massimo specifically withholds from taking a position towards the mistreatment reportedly experienced by Daniele.

4.2. Normalizing the complaint-implications of the clients' reports

In other instances the TC staff members take a position toward the moral relevancies raised by the clients' reports and, thus, toward their complaint-implications. One way of doing this is to re-contextualize the reported events in a different perspective, in which they can be seen in a less problematic way. This is achieved by integrating the clients' descriptions of the events in ways that make it possible to normalize them. This type of response is employed to downgrade the moral relevance of the clients' reports and, at the same time, to offer reassurance to the clients' conveyed concern (hence, acknowledging the personal relevance of the reported events). An example can be found in Excerpt 1b above. Massimo's '*ma no dai*' ('*but no come on*') response in line 42 seems to index Dina's emotional response (conveyed, for instance, by the 'crying' quality signalled by the # symbol in line 39) as exaggerated. The '*allora*' ('*so*') component projects an extended response, which takes the form of a report about Dina's situation, addressed to the co-present clients. After mentioning problems with the management of Dina's inheritance and her former status as a wealthy person (43–48), Massimo reports the decision to appoint a legal guardian to Dina (lines 49–53) and goes on to reassure her that the legal guardian will only take care of her assets (lines 54–57). He further expands his turn and repairs it (lines 59–60) to address Dina directly and to guarantee that she will not be deprived of her civil rights and duties. After Dina's acknowledgment, and partially overlapping it (lines 64–65), Massimo offers a new version of his reassurance (lines 65–66).

Complaints are commonly produced by describing some behaviour as transgressing norms about morally appropriate conduct (Drew 1998). In the case at hand, Dina reported that a document was mailed to her family that describes her as an incompetent person (it made her '*pass off as demented*'; see Excerpt 1a), with the possible consequence of discrediting her in the eyes of her son. From line 42 Massimo produces an account suggesting that the issue of the document is part of a legal action that was taken in Dina's interest, in order to help with the management of her money. By introducing this information, Massimo works to re-contextualize the reported event and to downgrade its negative moral valence, thus modifying its interpretation from something complainable (a mistreatment) to a more ordinary circumstance (a form of professional help). This upshot is drawn more explicitly when Massimo guarantees that the procedure does not amount to the, possibly dreaded, outcome of a disqualification (lines 59–66).

By reframing the problem in new terms Massimo achieves two goals. First, he avoids overtly disaffiliating from the moral dimension of Dina's report (an attribution of responsibility for an experienced mistreatment) and at the same time attends to its more personally relevant dimension (concern for a possibly forthcoming negative event) by offering reassurance. Second, he manages to distance himself from her judgment of the situation and to defend the ongoing legal procedure, the possibly adverse consequences of which had become the focus of Dina's report and complaint. Massimo does not deny that Dina's concern is legitimate; instead, he works to downgrade it by providing a framework in which the complained-of event can be re-assessed in less negative terms. The upshot is that, although the legal procedure might have caused some nuisance, it was justified in light of the superior interest of protecting Dina's assets. The justification becomes even more explicit in the continuation of the exchange (not shown here): later, Massimo claims that the legal procedure is aimed at helping Dina to receive a pension and adds that '*sometimes in the papers they put it a bit more seriously than it actually is in order to help you*'.

Excerpt 3 begins after the TC staff members have announced the arrival of a new client, Linda. It has turned out that some clients already know Linda and they have shared some information about her. In lines 1–2 Massimo inquires about Paola's (a client) knowledge of Linda and, by doing so, he provides for Paola to talk about Linda. After a long pause in which Paola does not volunteer such talk, Massimo solicits it more explicitly (line 5). This occasions the report of an unpleasant experience involving Linda (line 6).

Excerpt 3: Massimo, Paola and Lucia

1	M:	*tu Paola invece anche tu la*
		you Paola on the other hand do you
2		*conosc[i?*
		know her to[o?
3	P:	*[sì:?*
		[yes:?
4		(7.2)
5	M:	*non hai da commentar nulla?*
		don't you have anything to comment?
6	P:	*no: perché:: abbiam litiga:to*
		no: because:: we had a fi:ght
7		*in repa::rto.*
		in the wa::rd.
8		(0.7)
9	M:	*sì beh ma in reparto l'è un- (.)*
		yes well but in the ward it's a- (.)
10		*un luogo un po': .hhh (.) particola:re.*
		a place a bit: .hhh (.) specia:l.
11		(0.6)
12	L:	*facile per litigare là.*
		easy to have a fight there.
13		(.)
14	M:	*ecco.=qua nella comunità è*
		right.=here in the community
15		*un po' dive:rsa in[so:mma.*
		it's a bit diffe:rent I [me:an

Massimo's inquiry in lines 1–2 is produced after some clients have already communicated their familiarity with Linda, have described her in positive terms and have said that they are happy about her upcoming arrival. In this context, when solicited by Massimo to intervene (line 5), Paola reports a fight with Linda. Although she co-implicates herself in the episode ('*we had a fi:ght*', line 6) and does not cast blame on Linda explicitly, her report can be heard as possibly implying that she holds Linda responsible for generating the fight. As a matter of fact, the report is offered as an account for the refusal ('*no*' in line 6) to join a discussion that, as noted, connoted Linda's upcoming arrival in positive terms. By claiming that she is not willing to speak about Linda because she had a fight with her, Paola can be heard as having negative feelings toward her because of what happened at the ward.

Massimo's response seeks to reframe the meaning of the reported episode by re-contextualizing it. Massimo suggests that the psychiatric ward (where Paola and Linda were when the fight occurred) is a context where fights are a normal or understandable occurrence, an upshot made explicit in line 12 by another staff member, Lucia. Like in Excerpt 1b, by introducing this information Massimo achieves two results. First, he avoids overtly disagreeing with Paola's assessment of the situation. Second, Massimo manages to distance himself from Paola's assessment and to excuse Linda's conduct. Massimo does not deny that the reported experience might have been unpleasant; instead, he provides a context where the third party's responsibility (and hence the complainability of her conduct) can be downgraded. In this respect, Massimo's response also conveys reassurance that such episodes will not occur in the future, when Linda will be admitted to the TC, precisely because they can be expected to be associated with the context of the psychiatric ward (not the TC).

To summarize, normalizing responses allow the staff members to modify the implications of the clients' descriptions by inscribing the reported events in interpretive frameworks where the moral, complainable nature of the third parties' reported conduct can be downgraded. This resonates with Antaki *et al.*'s remark that a complaint can be disarmed 'by bringing in external circumstances [...] as a general observation, implicitly challenging the basis of the respondent's complaint' (Antaki *et al.* 2002: 446). Our analysis shows that these responses also enable the staff members to acknowledge the more personal relevancies conveyed by the clients' reports (e.g. the negative impact that the third parties' conduct had on them) and to avoid overt disaffiliation.

4.3. Undermining the complaint-implications of the clients' reports

In other instances the TC staff members take a more overtly disaffiliative stance toward the complaint-implications of the clients' reports. The design and sequential placement of this type of response testifies to its 'dispreferred' nature (Shegloff 2007): the response to the indirect complaint is sequentially delayed and preceded by a series of actions that challenge the grounds for the clients' complaints in a step-by-step fashion. Because these trajectories extend across long stretches of talk, we analyse a single, extended example. Before the beginning of Excerpt 4a, a client called Giuseppina has reported an event which can be glossed as follows: she said to Carla (a nurse, not present at the meeting) that she did not want to sweep the lunchroom; then she saw Carla go to the kitchen, she followed her and from the hallway she heard Carla complaining about her to other people, in an angry tone of voice. Giuseppina is still refering to Carla's behaviour at lines 1–2 and 4–5 (across line 2 another client produces talk that is not discernible on tape and is invited by a non-identified staff member to remain silent through the non-lexical expression '*s:::h*'). Barbara is a TC educator.

Excerpt 4a: Barbara and Giuseppina

01 G: *cioè (.) quando io:*
I mean (.) when I:
02 *se[ntivo (.) che=*
[heard (.) her=
03 ?? [( )
04 *=parl<u>a</u>v[a, (.)]*
=t<u>a</u>lkin[g, (.)]
05 ?? *[s : :][:h*
06 G: *[diceva*
[she was saying
07 *eh eh- di me:.*
eh eh- about me:.
08 (0.4)
09 *.hhh ↑allora da lì, (.) .hhh*
.hhh ↑so there, (.) .hhh
10 *pareva che mi levassero*
it seemed that they were pulling out
11 *le <u>u</u>:nghie.*
my n<u>a</u>i:ls.
12 (1.1)
13 G: *sen[tendo-*
hea[ring-
14 B: *[ma per<u>ché</u> ti pareva che*
[but <u>why</u> did it seem to you that
15 *ti levassero le ↑unghie*
they were pulling out your ↑nails
16 (.)
17 *co[sa ha detto*
wh[at did C<u>a</u>rla
18 G: [e-
19 B: *la [C<u>a</u>rla?]*
[say?]
20 G: *[che mi] che*
[that they] that
21 *mi tortu↑r<u>a</u>:ssero inso:mma.*
they were tor↑t<u>u</u>:ring me I mea:n.
22 (0.3)
23 *.hhh (.) [per sentirle dire=*
.hhh (.) [hearing her say=
24 B: *[(può darsi)-*
[(maybe)-
25 G: *=quel discorso, che la Carla ha ↑detto.*
=those things, that Carla ↑said.
26 (0.4)
27 B: *ma (0.7) perché hai (l'i:) (.)*
but (0.7) why do you get (the: i:) (.)
28 *.hh p<u>e</u>:nsi, (.) che fosse*
.hh do you th<u>i</u>nk, (.) that it was
29 *come una tort<u>u</u>ra?*
like a tort<u>u</u>re?
30 (0.3)
31 G: *.hh (1.0) (°mh-°) (0.8) non era*
.hh (1.0) (°mh-°) (0.8) it was
32 *u::n: motivo di dire così.=m::h*
not a::: reason to say so.=m::h
33 *perché pensavo*
because I thought
34 *che mi castig<u>a</u>:sse.*
that she would puni:sh me.
35 (0.4)
36 B: *ma è successo qualche v<u>o</u>lta*
but has it happened somet<u>i</u>mes
37 *che tu venga*
that you were
38 *casti[ga:ta?*
puni[shed?
39 ?? [([ )
40 G: *[no non mi avete*
[no you've
41 *mai castiga:ta.*
never puni:shed me.
42 (0.5)

Giuseppina elaborates on the negative impact of Carla's conduct (lines 9–11) by using the idiomatic expression '*pulling out my nails*', which can express a mix of pain and fear. Barbara's '*why*'-interrogative (lines 14–15) solicits an account for this claim. After a bit of silence Barbara produces a more factual inquiry (line 17), which, due to its positioning after the previous solicitation, can be heard as providing for Giuseppina to ground her complaint in a more elaborate report of Carla's actions. Giuseppina takes Barbara's inquiry quite literally and provides a translation of the expression in lines 10–11 in non-idiomatic terms (lines 20–21). In line 24, Barbara starts in overlap and then aborts what might be a candidate explanation for the reported events. In line 27 she takes a different tack and issues a new version of the previously uttered account solicitation. In institutional settings where pedagogical goals are pursued, a professional's account solicitation can be heard as pointing to some problematic aspects in the client's performance (Koshik 2003). Giuseppina seems to orient to this possibility when, in lines 31–32, she starts to back down from her previous position; at the same time, she satisfies Barbara's account solicitation by making explicit the grounds for her complaint (lines 33–34). In line 36 Barbara initiates a trajectory aimed at undermining such grounds. Barbara produces a challenge (Koshik 2003), which leads Giuseppina to admit that she has never been punished in the past (lines 40–41) and, hence, to implicitly recognize that her reaction to Carla's conduct might have been exaggerated. In a subsequent segment, omitted from the transcript, Barbara further challenges Giuseppina's grounds for complaining. We enter the interaction again in Excerpt 4b at a point where Barbara produces another version of the challenge in line 54.

Excerpt 4b: Barbara and Giuseppina

((14 lines omitted))

54	B:	*ma qua (.) è successo ancora*
		but here (.) has it ever happened
55		*che qualcuno ti abbia castiga:to?*
		that someone puni:shed you?
56		(0.3)
57	G:	*.hh no.*
58		(1.0)
59	B:	*↑e allora perché*
		↑and so why should we
60		*avremmo dovuto far↑lo ↓oggi.*
		have done ↑it ↓today.
61		(0.9)
62		*eh.*
63		(1.2)
64	B:	*però Giuseppina: (.)*
		but Giuseppina: (.)
65	G:	*d[immi te una cosa=*
		t[ell me something=
66	B:	*[una cosa.*
		[one thing.
67	G:	*=e [basta dai.*
		=and [let's finish it come on.
68	B:	*[tu devi impara↑re (.)*
		[you must ↑learn (.)
69		*ad ascoltare le perso:ne, (0.3)*
		to listen to people, (0.3)
70		*quando ti dicono le cose.*
		when they tell you things.
71		(0.6)
72		*la Carla assolutamen ↑te*
		Carla absolute↑ly
73		*non ti ha detto né che*
		didn't tell you neither that
74		*ti avrebbe castiga:to, (0.4)*
		she would punish you, (0.4)
75		*e neanche ti ha costretto a fare le cose.*
		nor did she force you to do things.
76		*↑semplicemente è venuta da me:, (0.4)*
		↑she simply came to me:, (0.4)
77		*per dirmi (.) Barbara (0.2) chiariamo*
		to tell me (.) Barbara (0.2) let's clear up
78		*come mai la Giuseppina*
		why Giuseppina
79		*non ha vo:glia.*
		doesn't feel like ((sweeping)).
80		(1.7)
81		*ma solo per capire!*
		but only to understand!

Giuseppina's admission that she has not been punished before (line 57) is followed by another account solicitation (line 59–60). Giuseppina's minimal response in line 62 can be understood as an implicit admission that, having been proven wrong so far, she lacks any reasons to further support her complaint about Carla. The series of challenges has thus led to an environment in which the grounds for Giuseppina's complaint have been dismantled. It is in this context that Barbara starts to respond to Giuseppina's original complaint (line 64). Overlapping Giuseppina's '*capitulation*' and invitation to have the final word about the issue (lines 65, 67), Barbara produces a reproach of sorts (lines 68–70), the implication of which is that, if Giuseppina had listened to the TC staff members from the start, nothing negative would have happened. The implication is also conveyed that Giuseppina misunderstood Carla's behaviour and, thus, that her complaint was not warranted in the first place. This upshot is made explicit from line 72, where Barbara overtly defends Carla's behaviour, affiliates with Carla by co-implicating herself in the line of action carried out by her, and claims that both had the best intentions.

Undermining responses convey disagreement with the clients' assessment of the situation, specifically by disaffiliating from the moral elements that constitute the complaint-relevance of the clients' reports. Unlike the normalizing responses examined in the previous section, undermining responses are hardly compatible with the possibility of acknowledging the personal relevance of the reported events; that is, they do not provide for the possibility of treating the clients' conveyed emotional experience as legitimate. Through normalizing responses the staff do not overtly disagree with the complaint-implications of the clients' reports, but add information to excuse or justify the third parties' conduct. This does not exclude that the third parties might have inadvertently caused harm or nuisance to the clients and, hence, that their emotional reaction (e.g. concern or fear) is legitimate. Undermining responses, on the other hand, provide for a radical display of inadequacy of the clients' assessment of the reported situation, with the implication that the clients had no valid reasons to be concerned in the first place. In Excerpt 4b, although Barbara can be heard as trying to reassure Giuseppina that nobody wanted to punish her (lines 72–81), she is also disconfirming the client's emotional reaction (concern/fear), by conveying that it was based on a misunderstanding of the staff members' intentions.

5. Discussion

The TC staff members can respond in ways that display a neutral orientation toward the complaint-implications of a client's reports. In some instances, however, they move beyond professional neutrality to distance themselves from the client's conveyed

perspective and, in other instances, they openly disaffiliate from the client's complaints. How do these practices relate to the professionals' institutional mandate within the TC?

In everyday conversation, complaints make it relevant for recipients to display their stance regarding the reported events (Drew and Walker 2009). Research on responses to indirect complaints in different institutional settings has shown that professionals commonly display reluctance to endorse a perspective (either affiliative or disaffiliative) toward clients' complaints, in line with norms of neutrality that are pervasive in many professions. In Ruusuvuori and Lindfors' (2009: 2416) terms, ignoring the complaint-implications of clients' problem descriptions in medical consultations allows doctors 'to lead the conversation towards the management of the ongoing business rather than towards affiliating or disaffiliating with the criticism'. In the TC meetings analysed in this study, the staff members also maintain a neutral stance in situations where they prioritize pursuing some practical business instead of dealing with the complaint-implications raised by the clients' reports. This is especially the case when the staff members engage in some institutionally-relevant activity (Jingree *et al.* 2006), as in Excerpt 1a, where Massimo targets the practical issues raised by Dina's report, instead of its complaint-implications; or in Excerpt 2, where Massimo selects to carry on the agenda of positively reinforcing the clients' renewal of their wardrobes, instead of affiliating with or disaffiliating from Daniele's complaint about his father. In both excerpts the clients' reports are treated as the carriers of problems-to-be-solved, not as attributions of responsibility to which the staff members need to display affiliation or disaffiliation.

The other instances examined in this article, nevertheless, show that the staff members can and sometimes do take a stance toward the clients' indirect complaints. In Excerpts 1b and 3, Massimo works to re-contextualize and to normalize the clients' complaints. Two further features of this practice are: (1) that by integrating the clients' descriptions with new information, Massimo displays firsthand knowledge of the reported events; and (2) that by distancing himself from the clients' conveyed perspective, he also displays some stake or interest in the reported events. In Excerpt 1b, he clearly endorses the view that the legal procedure, which would lead to the appointment of a legal guardian, was activated in Dina's best interest. Massimo seems to abandon a neutral orientation toward Dina's indirect complaint at a point where her report could shed negative light on an institutionally valued decision (the appointment of a legal guardian). By addressing his account to the co-present clients, Massimo possibly displays an orientation to Dina's report as raising the suspicion that the TC staff are involved in a procedure that is causing Dina some harm, an interpretation that Massimo works to prevent. Through the use of the passive verb form ('it was decided') he can suggest, while not overtly claiming, that the staff members were somehow co-implicated in the decision to appoint a legal guardian, or at least that they endorse or are aligned to this decision. In Excerpt 3, Paola's report might shed negative light on the staff members' decision to admit Linda; that is, a person who engaged in aggressive behaviour in the past. By accounting for Linda's behaviour as something that might have been brought about by the context of the psychiatric ward, Massimo can convey reassurance that such episodes will not occur in the future and thus, by implication, that the staff members' decision to admit Linda to the TC will not put the clients in danger. In summary, in these examples Massimo draws a line of defence against the implied possibility that the staff members' decisions can somehow cause harm to the clients. Although the clients' reports embed *indirect* complaints – namely, complaints about states of affairs whose responsibility is not attributed (at least not in any overt manner) to the recipients – they are nevertheless treated as pointing to situations where the staff members' agency seems at least co-implicated. This particular treatment of indirect complaints is likely to reflect the organizational structure of this residential TC, in which the staff members engage with the clients on a daily basis, have an institutional mandate to watch over them and are responsible for their safety (Jingree *et al.* 2006). By avoiding addressing the responsibility issues raised by the clients' complaints in the meetings, the TC staff members might risk leaving on record the implication that their own actions are somehow involved in putting the clients in danger (see also Heinemann 2009). This concern is also embodied in Barbara's treatment of Giuseppina's complaint in Excerpt 4b. By undermining the grounds for the complaint, Barbara deals with and eventually firmly rejects the conveyed implication that a member of the staff might have caused some harm to Giuseppina.

To conclude, although the TC staff members can make use of neutral responses to the complaint-implications of the clients' reports, they can also provide their own stance by distancing themselves or by overtly disaffiliating from the clients' assessments of the reported events. These practices appear to be designed to deal with the practical problems raised by the particular position that the staff members occupy

within the organization of the TC: while they support the clients, they are also responsible for the clients' safety. An orientation to this concern can account for the staff members' apparent sensitivity towards the possibility, raised by the clients' reports, that the staff have been co-implicated in courses of action that have caused or might cause the clients some harm. Non-neutral responses allow them to deflect these possible interpretations.

Finally, we have shown that different types of non-neutral response have different interactional implications. Normalizing responses allow the staff members to distance themselves from the clients' indirect complaints without overtly disagreeing with them; they leave a space open where the clients' emotional experience can be recognized as legitimate. Undermining responses are effective in unambiguously conveying the staff members' disaffiliation; at the same time, through a rejection of the reasons that undergird the clients' indirect complaints, they provide for a disconfirmation of the clients' conveyed emotional experience (e.g. feeling hurt or otherwise negatively influenced by the complained-of misconduct).

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Appendix: transcription symbols

[word	overlapping talk (onset)
word]	overlapping talk (offset)
(0.6)	silence in tenth of seconds
(.)	silence less than 0.2 seconds
word= =word	continuous parts of an utterance with no break or pause
wo::rd	sound extension
word.	falling intonation
word?	rising intonation
word,	continuing intonation
↑word	talk higher than the prior talk
↓word	talk lower than the prior talk
°word°	talk quieter than the prior talk
word	emphasis
word-	cut-off word
hh	outbreath
.hh	inbreath
(word)	word in doubt
( )	unclear word

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Marco Pino received his PhD in education and lifelong learning sciences from the University of Verona and is currently Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham. His research is in the field of Conversation Analysis. Address for correspondence: Sue Ryder Centre for the Study of Supportive, Palliative and End of Life Care, The University of Nottingham, School of Health Sciences, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, NG7 2HA, UK. Email: marco.pino75@gmail.com

Luigina Mortari received her PhD in educational sciences from the University of Padova and is currently full Professor at the University of Verona. Her research is in the field of Phenomenology. Address for correspondence: Department of Philosophy, Education and Psychology, University of Verona, Lungadige Porta Vittoria 17, Verona, 37129, Italy. Email: luigina.mortari@univr.it