Childhood-Grounded Explanations for Personal Troubles

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# CHILDHOOD-GROUNDED EXPLANATIONS FOR PERSONAL TROUBLES:

# SOCIAL PROBLEMS WORK IN RADIO COUNSELLING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how images of unfortunate childhoods are invoked to make sense of psychological problems in adulthood. I use conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis to study a Swedish radio program in which a psychotherapist talks to people about their personal troubles. The findings suggest that, on the one hand, the image of an unfortunate childhood was used as an explanatory framework for individuals' problematic experiences. On the other hand, the childhood-grounded reasoning, applied to individual cases, illustrated the explanatory framework and reaffirmed it as a commonsense way of reasoning about personal troubles.

Keywords: social problems work, radio counselling, childhood as explanatory framework, membership categorization, conversation analysis

# INTRODUCTION

Historically, childhood has come to be understood as a special period of life: children are expected to be innocent, vulnerable, and dependent on adults (Ariès 1962). In modern Western culture, children are viewed as in need of special protection and vigilance (Jackson and Scott 1999). The historical formation of this cultural understanding is reflected for example in the development of juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice in the U.S. in the late 1800s, when special services for young offenders were introduced, stemming from the idea that, in contrast to adults, children should not be punished but educated (e.g., Platt 1969; Schlossman 1977). The cultural image of children as vulnerably dependent and incompetent social actors (Hockey and James 1993) leads to the differentiation of "fortunate" and "unfortunate" childhoods: happy children who are under adults' protection are contrasted to children who are victimized, abused, and abandoned (Ennew 1986). The concern for adults' duty to protect children has developed into the concept of "child maltreatment" as a social problem (e.g., Johnson 1995). One aspect of the social problem of maltreated children is psychological consequences of abuse and neglect in their adult lives (e.g., Hall 2003). Both professionals (such as psychotherapists) and laypersons use the understanding that a disadvantaged childhood causes psychological problems in adult life to grasp and explain troublesome experiences in adulthood. For example, in their phenomenological study of memories of child abuse, Dale and Allen (1998) found that these memories were most frequently connected to experiences of being deeply troubled in adulthood—that is, being affected by symptoms such as depression and relationship problems.

This paper studies procedures of reasoning through which the cultural concept of a difficult, unhappy childhood is called upon in radio conversations with a psychotherapist as a way to make sense of personal problems in adult life. The study draws on data from a Swedish radio counselling program in which a psychotherapist talks to people who seek help with various life problems, such

as difficulties in intimate relationships, anxiety, or loneliness. In the radio conversations, callers' distressing experiences are explored to explicate their nature and origin. Causes for callers' distress are frequently found in the current or recent circumstances of the callers' lives, for example fighting with addiction or being newly divorced. Nevertheless, the discussed problems are also repeatedly interpreted as originating in painful childhood experiences, such as abuse or neglect. This study explicates the interpretive work aimed at building the understanding of callers' problems as grounded in their childhood experiences. Namely, the paper investigates how childhood experiences are invoked as accounts or explanations for callers' problems and difficulties in adulthood. The focus is on the interactional work accomplished by the radio psychologist and program callers to apply commonsense cultural images of "unfortunate" childhood to personal experiences and forge causal linkages between callers' childhoods and adulthoods. The findings are further discussed in relation to the individual cases being shaped as instances of the social problem of abused and neglected children who grow up into adults with psychological problems.

## Social Problems Work

The study draws upon the concept of *social problems work* (Holstein and Miller 1993, 2003; Miller and Holstein 1997), coined within the constructionist approach to designate reality-assigning practices that link public interpretive structures to aspects of everyday life. In contrast to the classical constructionist approach to social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977)—which focuses on claims-making activities propounding (or contesting) an understanding of putative conditions as social problems—the social problems work approach draws attention to how "social problems categories, once established, are attached to experience in order to enact identifiable objects of social problems discourse" (Holstein and Miller 1993:152). Social problems work is defined as interpretive activity through which shared social problem categories are assigned and legitimated

as they are applied to individual experiences. In this way, the categories constitute ways of understanding and representing experiences. The activity is twofold: on the one hand, it entails applying culturally shared categories to candidate circumstances and thus using them as interpretive resources to make sense of personal experiences; on the other hand, instances of social problems are constructed through the articulation of designated social problems with individual cases and culturally shared categories are maintained and confirmed.

One of the settings where problematic or troublesome behaviors and experiences are routinely and specifically topicalized, and thus are most likely to produce social problems discourse, is public media (Holstein and Miller 2003; Maynard 1988). In the media, social problems categories are often represented by individual stories of persons in the categories (Loseke 2010). The individual stories demonstrate the ways in which putative conditions can be injurious to people, thereby shaping collective understanding of social problems: "specifying 'victims' elucidates 'problems'" (Holstein and Miller 1990:116). Another setting that routinely deals with problematic experiences is encounters with professionals such as social workers, lawyers, police officers, and psychologists. This study examines a site that combines features of both settings—encounters with a psychotherapist on the radio. In such a setting, social problems work is likely to occur and can be studied from the point of view of both how the commonsense knowledge about a social problem is called upon to make sense of individual experiences, and how through this interpretive work the commonsense concept of the social problem is maintained and promoted.

Weinberg (1997) suggested extending the notion of social problems work to the dynamics by which people may animate categorical objects when accounting for their own and others' actions. In his ethnographic study of treatment programs for "dually diagnosed" homeless adults, he found that behaviors the program participants considered troublesome, unusual, or unintelligible were treated as evidence of mental disorders rather than as the behaviors of morally accountable

agents capable of controlling their actions and emotions. In this way, the program members actualized mental disorders as "causally influential non-human agents." This allowed them to regard problematic behaviors as issuing from within the persons of the members but not from their selves as morally accountable agents. Both mental disorders (non-human agency) and members' selves (human agency) were regarded as equally capable of driving personal conduct; the boundaries between the two were continuously constructed in and through interactions. Thus, the program members did not merely attach categorial understandings to individual experiences but animated them as objects populating their worlds. Weinberg notes that the relative impact of mental disorders on members' personal conduct remained ambiguous in view of the members' participation in the treatment program that required responsible ("human") actions of being willing and able to perform the recovery work.

My study explicates interpretive work that incorporates categorial understandings being attached to individual experiences as well as being animated. It shows how unhappy or traumatic childhoods are brought up when discussing personal problems in adulthood as a means to explain and account for behaviors and experiences described as problematic, confusing, irrational, or bizarre. The study also shows how childhood memories can be animated as "the inner child" existing within an individual but still separate from him or her. These two aspects of social problems work—attaching and animating categorial concepts—are studied via a close analysis of the unfolding interaction in order to explicate procedures of reasoning through which social problem categories are invoked as an interpretive resource in making sense of personal troubles.

## Problematic Experiences and Explanatory Frameworks

Those who suffer from conditions with ambiguous causes and symptoms, as in the case of mental illness or psychological problems, face a need to construct an explanatory framework for their

problematic experiences (Karp 1992). The applied framework provides a way of relating to the condition and dealing with the practical difficulties it causes (Hydén 1997). The explanations given for experiences tend to incorporate and build upon cultural conceptions about the condition in question (Early 1982). For example, the interpretive framework may be provided by a diagnosis which, being part of the shared cultural knowledge in a particular society, puts a name on the condition and attaches a category to the history of the difficulties.

Explaining problematic behaviors and experiences by attaching a diagnostic category to them may allow the person to absolve themselves from responsibility for their behaviors and experiences and thus be a way of preserving their positive sense of self.[1] In an ethnographic study of group meetings among people suffering from affective disorders such as depression, Karp (1992) found that program participants used the rhetoric of biochemical causes of their disorders to account for their behaviors which otherwise might be seen as those of someone who is manipulative, self-absorbed, lazy, or otherwise flawed. Adopting the "biochemical causation theory" allowed participants to make a distinction between their "true selves" and their "illness selves" ("it was not me, but my illness talking"). In this way, the participants established and reaffirmed their understanding of themselves as intelligent and proper but with interpersonal skills compromised by disease.

In expert–client encounters, it is professionals' prerogative to suggest explanatory frameworks for clients' troubles. However, problem definitions and explanations are not mechanically appointed by professionals but rather negotiated and jointly assembled by the professional and the client (Buttny 2004; Miller and Silverman 1995; Scheff 1968; Thell 2018).

[1] This is not to say that attaching a diagnostic category always has such an effect. For example, a diagnosis of personality disorder may bring patients to an understanding of themselves as somehow defective and therefore challenge their positive sense of self (Anssi Peräkylä, personal communication).

For example, Turowets and Maynard (2017) have shown that a mother may challenge the clinician's characterization of her child's actions as symptoms associated with a particular psychiatric diagnosis and thereby participate in clinical knowledge-making. In counselling and psychotherapy, problem definitions and explanations are reached not (as much) through a diagnosis, but rather through reinterpretations of clients' descriptions of their troubles. As an illustration, therapists and counsellors tend to shift focus from the clients' complaints toward other people to the clients' own behaviors and personality features (Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar 2005). The diagnostical work in psychotherapy is often grounded in the expert's professional theory, but may also rest on commonsense knowledge. For example, a psychotherapist may allude to shared cultural norms attached to particular stages of life to suggest age-related explanations for clients' troubles (Thell and Jacobsson 2016) grounded in the normative images of being "on time" and "off time" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

This paper examines how definitions of psychological problems may be grounded in commonsense knowledge about both the social problem of abused and neglected children and broader issues of childhood and family. Family discourse research reveals that the concept of family contains a body of taken-for-granted assumptions about, among other things, childhood and upbringing (e.g., Miller 1990); it legitimizes the differentiation of child and adult and shapes a prescriptive commonsense understanding of parenthood (Bernardes 1985). The expectations associated with family member roles are used as a cultural resource and interpretive framework to make sense of everyday situations and individual experiences, and can be called upon to cast individuals as deviant and warranting intervention in their lives (Gubrium 1988; Miller 1991).

The study focuses on the turn-by-turn unfolding of interactions during *The Radio Psychologist* to explicate how the conversation participants shape their understanding of childhood experiences as harmful and consequential in adult life. My goal is to elucidate sense-making

practices methodically used to build an image of abused and/or neglected child and link this image to adulthood in order to account for problematic behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. The analysis describes in detail how, through these practices, prescriptive commonsense knowledge about "good" family is invoked and put into diagnostic use in psychotherapeutic conversations.

## METHOD AND DATA

The study uses methods of ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA; e.g., Sidnell and Stivers 2013), which allow a close examination of talk-in-interaction. It has been suggested that CA is particularly suitable to the study of *how* people construct meaning (Hollander and Gordon 2006:184), and in particular to studies of social problems work (Best 2003). CA allows me to trace sequentially organized interactional practices used by the psychotherapist and program callers to reach particular understandings of callers' problems.

I also use membership categorization analysis (MCA; see Fitzgerald and Housley 2015), which—similarly to CA—originates from the work of Harvey Sacks (1972, 1992). MCA informs the study through its focus on how categories are called upon in talk and text to evoke inferences about categorized objects and people. The categories do not need to be named in the discourse, but may instead be called upon by invoking category-bounded activities and characteristics (Sacks 1972). For example, a description of a child as feeling lonely and not getting support or love from his or her parents may assume the category "neglected child" without overtly naming it. Earlier research shows that, among other things, MCA is useful for studying the commonsense basis of social actors' reasoning (Benson and Drew 1978; McHoul and Watson 1984).

My data comes from the Swedish program *The Radio Psychologist* (Swedish: *Radiopsykologen*), broadcast since 2009 on one of national radio channels produced by the Swedish public broadcaster. The half-hour program airs every Thursday at 11 a.m. (except for a two-month

summer hiatus) and repeats at 8 p.m. on the same day and again at 1 a.m. on Saturdays. All the broadcast episodes are available on the program's web page. In the program, a certified psychotherapist performs a role of host, greeting listeners and introducing callers, and expert, providing professional help. The episodes usually consist of welcoming words, a conversation between the psychotherapist and a caller, and closing words where listeners are invited to contact the program by telephone, email, and post, and submit comments on the program's web page.

The data corpus for this study comprises 42 episodes broadcast during 2014. Of the 42 episodes, 16 invoked problematic childhood as an explanation for the problems in adulthood under discussion. In the other 26 episodes, there was either no reference to childhood experiences or childhood was not framed as a cause of the problem discussed. In these cases, the problems discussed could be framed as stemming from potentially distressing life situations (such as the inability to meet one's children or grandchildren as a result of family conflict, death of a loved one, drug addiction of one's child or recent divorce). In other situations, problems were connected to life-changing events or transitions (such as ageing or disability). In these cases, childhood memories were rarely addressed, and if they were it was outside the aetiological framing of the problem's causes—for example, in the context of reconstructing a history of a relationship with a separated parent.

The 16 episodes, in which childhood was discussed to account for psychological problems, were transcribed and then analyzed in detail. (See Appendix for a legend to the transcription symbols; for transcription conventions see, e.g., Hepburn and Bolden 2013.) Two certified psychologists trained in different psychotherapeutic approaches—psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral—served as hosts–experts in respectively 14 and 2 episodes. I will refer to the professional talking to a program caller as radio psychologist, psychologist and therapist—interchangeably.

## RESULTS

In the 16 episodes studied, three kinds of issues were raised: *troublesome emotional experiences*, such as fear of losing friends, feeling of worthlessness or loneliness, anxiety, or depression; *problematic patterns of behavior*, such as the inability to relax or constant attempts to please others, and *difficulties in establishing close relationships*, such as uncontrollable offensive behaviors or discomfort in romantic relationships. In half of the cases, already in the initial description of their troublesome experiences callers connected their problems to their childhood memories and thus brought this in as a part of the agenda for the discussion.[2] Notably, according to the program producer, who talked to callers prior to their encounters with the radio psychologist, "many [callers] wanted to start talking about their childhood right away" and found it difficult to formulate their concern in relation to their present experiences.[3] In the other half of the episodes, callers' childhoods were brought up later in the conversation, in the context of searching for explanations for callers' problems. For example, callers could reveal their childhood memories in response to the psychologist's question that invited them to reflect on possible explanations for their problematic feelings, behaviors, and experiences ("Why do you think this is so?" or "Where does this come from, do you think?"), or after the psychologist's interpretation of the caller's experiences as possibly originating in the past.

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[2] In one of the episodes, a radio listener in her letter to the program asked about possible consequences of being brought up by parents with mental illness. The listener suggested a connection between her psychological difficulties in adulthood and her childhood with mentally ill parents. The psychologist elaborated on this connection when answering to the letter in the program.

[3] The citation comes from a telephone interview with the program producer (May 2, 2015), which I conducted to gather background information about the program's production.

The understanding of the caller's childhood as unfortunate was arrived at by calling upon the cultural image of a child as vulnerable and compliant to adult influences, as well as the moral obligations attached to parental roles. Childhood memories were invoked to explain troublesome experiences, and suggest that these experiences were understandable and sensible rather than unreasonable or irrational. This reasoning was grounded in the understanding of the "otherness" of callers who had been severely harmed by the circumstances of their childhoods. Such childhood-grounded explanations constituted an interpretation of callers' problems as well as grounds for suggesting a remedy, such as taking care of the "inner child" who still longed for love and care.

Below, I first show how childhood memories were brought up in the radio conversations and explicate description-categorisation practices the conversation participants used to suggest callers' (retroactive) membership in the category "neglected and/or abused child." The analysis also shows how a causal link between childhood and adulthood experiences could be implied by the program caller herself (Extract 1), and how the link could be explicitly asserted in the process of its collaborative establishment and elaboration by the radio psychologist and the caller (Extract 2). After this, I discuss how an understanding of childhood-induced ways of conduct as an underlying pattern in callers' lives was shaped. Lastly, I turn to practices used to animate childhood memories in order to position callers as being able to take control over their thoughts and feelings and thereby being able to cope with their problems.

## Categorial Work: Invoking Categories "Abused Child" and "Neglected Child"

Accounts grounded in problematic childhood appeared to contain two elements: explicit or implicit invocations of (1) the categories "abused child" and/or "neglected child" and (2) a causal link between childhood experiences and behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in adulthood. The categories "abused child" and "neglected child" were never explicitly used by conversation participants and

were instead implied through portraying parents as not complying with their parental obligations. These implicative practices drew upon commonsense knowledge about "normal" or "good" relationships between children and parents. The causal link between childhood and adulthood experiences was, in turn, grounded in the commonsense understanding of continuity of the life course (cf. Hockey and James 1993).

Callers revealed their childhood memories in the context of suggesting or searching—together with the therapist—for explanations for their current problems. The link between childhood and adulthood experiences was built on the assumption about chronological causality: early experiences shape later experiences. However, the reasoning followed a reverse chronological order: the discussions started with callers' current adulthood problems and then their childhood experiences were invoked as a possible explanation for these problems. The degree to which the childhood-adulthood causal link was taken as a given in particular callers' life stories depended on the "obviousness" of the misfortune in the description of their childhood. In cases where the description incorporated categorial definitions of neglecting and/or abusive parents, the mere categorial description could be regarded as a sufficient explanation for the caller's adult problems. In contrast, in the cases where childhood was portrayed in less precise and more abstract terms (for example, as lacking love or suffused with loneliness), conversation participants engaged in a process of elaboration to acknowledge and evaluate those childhood experiences as significant and the childhood circumstance as severely unfortunate. This work comprised efforts to define which experiences and conditions (and in which way) could be considered to constitute a harmful childhood.

Extract 1 shows an example of a categorial description of a caller's parents and caretakers, formulated by the caller herself at the beginning of the program. The extract starts with the caller,

by name Maria,[4] describing her difficulties in building relationships with others: she defines her trouble as an issue of "being distrustful" (line 1). The extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) "all my life" emphasizes the description and at the same time indicates a time frame that includes the caller's childhood.

Extract 1 (caller Maria)

01. **C:** **jag har ju varit misstrogen i hela mitt liv**
I have been distrustful all my life
02. **HHhh. mot människor.**
HHhh. towards people.
03. **RP:** **jaha?**
oh I see?
04. **C:** **a: h. [jag vet inte om du vet nånting om min bakgrund?**
yeah h. [I don't know if you know something about my background?
05. **RP:** **[på vilket sätt-**
[in which way-
06. **RP:** **nej, jag vet ingenting om din bakgrund. (.) [berät-**
no, I know nothing about your background. (.) [tell-
07. **C:** **[jao: men då**
[yeah: but then
08. **kanske kan vara bra för dig å veta att jag växte upp**
maybe it can be good for you to know that I grew up
09. **med e: både mamma och pappa var alkoholister,**
with e: both mum and dad were alcoholics,
10. **hh. .h och min mamma (.) hon ville inte ha mig.**
hh. .h and my mum (.) she didn't want to have me.
11. **(1.2)**
12. **RP:** ***nej,***
*no,*
13. **C:** **och: aså det uppfattade jag när jag blev lite: större.**
and: well I understood this when I became a little bigger.
14. **RP:** **mm,**

[4] Callers' names have been changed due to ethical considerations.

15. **C: .hh å sen har jag varit utsatt för övergrepp hh. a:v både pappa**
.hh and then I have been abused hh. by both dad
16. **å så var det två andra män mamma hade.**
and then there were two other men mum had.
17. **(0.8)**
18. **C: så det kanske inte e så konstigt att**
so it maybe isn't so strange that
19. **jag har varit misstrogen.**
I have been distrustful.
20. **RP: nej verkligen inte,**
no indeed not,

Maria, the caller, asks if the radio psychologist was informed about her early experiences (line 4). Here, Maria alludes to her prior conversation with a program producer wondering how much information the producer communicated to the psychologist. Maria then suggests that her early experiences may be significant for understanding her problem ("it can be good for you to know," line 8), and proceeds to talk about her childhood. She characterizes her parents using the categorial description "alcoholics" (line 9). This categorial description is disjunctive with the categories "mum" and "dad" (cf. McHoul and Watson 1984); it involves downgrading of her parents' abilities to perform their parental roles. Maria then adds a description of her mother as someone who did not want to have her child (line 10). Here again, the caller combines the category "mum" with a feature that is strongly "unassociable" with the category (see Jayyusi 1984); Maria conveys that her mother lacked a critical quality (wanting and loving her child) which makes "a good mother." In this way, the caller implies her own (retroactive) membership in the category "neglected child."

After receiving only minimal acknowledgements in response (lines 12 and 14), Maria continues her narrative. She reveals that she was abused by her father and other men her mother had (lines 15–16). Although Maria does not specify, the abuse may be heard as sexual by means

of the "consistency rule" (Sacks 1972): we understand the mother's relationship with the two men as sexual and so we may understand the abuse reported by the caller. Maria implies her membership in the category "a victim of abuse" ("I have been abused," line 15), which—in the context of the narration about childhood—also entails her membership in the category "abused child."

The implication about the caller having been both a neglected and an abused child is built upon invoking the complementary categories from the relational pair "child–parent"—those of "mum" and "dad"—and moral duties and obligations (to love and care for) which are bound to these categories. Maria's childhood is thus portrayed as ill-fated through the emotionally loaded negative depiction of negligent and abusive parents (cf. Johnson 1995). Maria's description of her family is built to show a violation of the major commonsense assumptions of a "good" family which is expected to provide loving and caring social bonds and safe home (Miller 1990).

In line 17, the therapist still withholds her response and Maria formulates a conclusion (lines 18–19), linking her talk back to the problem of "being distrustful" (compare lines 19 and 1). While attribution in line 1 is dispositional—"I am a kind of person who does not trust"—the attribution in line 19 is rather biographical: "I do not trust because I've learned not to trust." The caller alludes to a causal link between childhood and adulthood through a metaphor of continuation: she did not have reasons to trust people when she was a child and she still does not trust them. Maria's candidate explanation (note "maybe" in line 18) that her childhood circumstances constitute a cause of her present problematic experiences is now readily endorsed by the psychologist (line 20). The conversation participants thus agree that the caller's childhood conditions provide explanatory grounds for her problem. The causal link between childhood circumstances and adult problem is not explained (in which way or through which mechanisms childhood conditions adulthood) and is regarded as something obvious.

In the next example, in contrast to Extract 1, the initial description of the caller's childhood is not categorial and is followed by a process of elaboration to clarify the unfortunate nature of the caller's background. The logics of reasoning is reverse in this case: the caller and the therapist first achieve an account of the caller's problem in adulthood and then elaborate on it by invoking the category of "a neglected child" (see "orphan" in line 43). At the beginning of this conversation, the caller, Stefan, complained that he worked too much (without any days or time off) and was unable to relax. The extract shows how a childhood-grounded account is assembled collaboratively in the unfolding talk as the therapist and caller search for a possible explanation for the caller's behavior.

Extract 2 (caller Stefan)

01. **RP: så varför gör du det? hh.(0.8) varför jobbar du så?**
    so why are you doing it? hh. (0.8) why are you working like this?
02. **C: jag tror att nån ska klappa mig på axeln,**
    I believe that someone will pat me on my back,
    [several lines are omitted]
03. **RP: så finns det någon särskild som du skulle vilja ha**
    so is there someone special whom you would like to get
04. **klappen från då?**
    the pat from then?
05. **C: nej jag tror faktiskt det är allmänt. .hh (0.8)**
    no I actually think that it's general. .hh (0.8)
06. **för jag har inga (1.6) föräldrar kvar i livet,**
    because I have no (1.6) parents still alive,
07. **jag har inga .hhh närstående, (.) så.**
    I have no .hhh family relatives, (.) like this.
08. **RP: men om de funnits kvar, (.) [( )**
    but if they were still here, (.) [( )
09. **C: [så hade det varit JÄTTEbra**
    [then it would be VERY nice
10. **att få en klapp på axeln å inte bara en klapp utan en jättekram.**
    to get a pat on my back and not just a pat but a big hug.
11. **RP: en jättekram,**

a big hug,
12. **C:** **ja [(0.4) precis. (.) (å det e väl-)**
yes [(0.4) exactly. (.) (and it's maybe-)
13. **RP:** **[.hhhh f:- för att- för att du var van å få det**
[.hhhh be- because- because you were used to getting one
14. **eller för att du inte ha fått det? hh.**
or because you haven't got it? hh.
15. **C:** **för att jag inte ha fått det.**
because I haven't got it.

In line 1, the radio psychologist initiates a search for an explanation for Stefan's, the caller's, problem. In the following lines (2–15), the conversation participants reach the understanding of the deficient nature of Stefan's childhood (see, particularly, lines 13–15). The participants arrive at this understanding successively, by searching for Stefan's significant others (lines 3–7) and checking whether it is his parents' recognition Stefan longs for (lines 8–12). In the continuation of the extract below, in response to the psychologist's request (lines 16–18), the caller summarizes the prior talk by formulating an explanation for his problematic behavior (lines 19–21): he draws a parallel between his childhood experiences and his present behavior and assumes their causal connection.

Extract 2 (continued after several lines omitted)

16. **RP: om du skulle: (0.3) göra en mening av det här?**
if you could (0.3) make a sentence out of this?
17. **(2.2)**
18. **RP: hur skulle du formulera den då?**
how would you formulate it then?
19. **C:** **.hhh hhh. den kärlek jag sökte å behövde när jag var liten**
.hhh hhh. the love I sought and needed when I was little
20. **den .hhh försöker jag (1.5) hh. (0.6) få tag i idag**
.hhh I'm trying (1.5) hh. (0.6) to get hold of it today
21. **genom att (.) prestera.**

by (.) accomplishing things.

22. **RP: hm.**
23. **(2.0)**
24. **RP: .hhhh vet du varför du inte fick den här kärleken**
.hhhh do you know why you didn't receive this love
25. **som du hade behövt?**
that you needed?
26. **C: .h .h mm::: ja, (2.6) e:: det fanns inte- h- min far dog**
.h .h mm::: yeah, (2.6) e:: there was no- h- my father died
27. **när jag var ung,**
when I was young,
28. **RP: [hm**
29. **C: [min mor då (.) överlevde hh. fysiskt [men inte mer.**
[my mother then (.) survived hh. physically [but no more.
30. **RP: [hur u-?**
[how yo-?
31. **RP: hur ung var du?**
how young were you?
32. **C: sju?**
seven?
33. **RP: sju (.) a det e väldigt ungt. .hh [då e ma-**
seven (.) well that's very young. .hh [that's when someone is
34. **C: [a:**
[yeah
35. **RP: då e man liten.**
that's when someone is little.
36. **C: mm.**
37. **(1.0)**
38. **C: .hh och min mor klarade inte riktigt av den situationen, (1.2)**
.hh and my mother didn't really handle that situation, (1.2)
39. **och hade (0.8) haft egna problem när h. hon växte inte upp**
and had (0.8) had her own problems where h. she didn't grow up
40. **i sin (0.3) sin (.) originalfamilj heller å,**
with her (0.3) her (.) original family either and,
41. **RP: [a:**
[yeah
42. **C: [så hon bar (.) med sig de problemen (.) vidare.**
[so she carried (.) those problems with her (.) later on.

43. **RP: .hh så du blev föräldralös,**
.hh so you became an orphan,
44. **C: ja i praktiken blev jag det. (.) [känslomässigt.**
yes in practice I did. (.) emotionally.
45. **RP: [hm.**
46. **C: jag fick mat på bordet,**
I had food on the table,
47. **RP: hm: (0.3) men det fanns ingen där,**
hm: (0.3) but there was no one there,
48. **C: nej (.) precis.**
no. (.) exactly.

In lines 16–18, the psychologist requests a one-sentence summary of the achieved understanding of the caller's problem. Earlier in the extract, the conversation participants established a link between Stefan's problem and his childhood, and the requested format of one sentence provides for Stefan formulating this link economically and explicitly, as a gist of the earlier talk. The caller responds by connecting the temporal spaces of "when I was little" (line 19) and "today" (line 20) through an image of compensation: today he is trying to get hold of love which he did not get then. The account for adult behaviors is based on the deficit nature of Stefan's childhood: as a child he needed and searched for love but did not get it. The understanding of the deficit nature of Stefan's early experiences is implied already in lines 9–15 (he longs for a big hug that he did not get from his parents) and is based on the commonsense knowledge about children's right for their parents' love. The invoking of parents' entitlement to provide love and care for their child—jointly accomplished through the psychologist's questions and the caller's answers—allows for building a description of the caller as having been neglected when he was a child.

In the following lines (24–48), the conversation participants work up the childhood-grounded account by invoking Stefan's childhood memories and elaborating the portrayal of his childhood as lacking a crucial component of parental love and emotional care. The participants

accomplish this discursive work cooperatively. It starts with the therapist inviting Stefan to elaborate on the deficient nature of his childhood (lines 24–25). Then the therapist "intensifies" Stefan's descriptions. In lines 31–33, he recategorizes the caller's descriptor "young" into "very young" (emphasis on "very") and then into "little" (line 35). Because the description occurs in the context of narration about Stefan's loss of his father, this change in the wording from "young person" into "little child" shapes the understanding of Stefan's even more vulnerable age and him having been even more dependent on the other living parent's care. At the same time, Stefan portrays his mother as having "survived physically but not more" (line 29) and someone who herself "didn't really handle" his father's death (line 38). The caller implies that his mother was not capable of providing him with the care he needed as a child. Interestingly, he locates one cause of his mother's remoteness in the circumstances of her own childhood (lines 38–42), this time invoking the idea of continuation in order to connect childhood and adulthood experiences: "she carried those problems with her later on." By shaping an understanding of his mother's childhood as also problematic (note "either" in line 40) the caller alludes to a multigenerational attribution of causality for his own behavioral problems in adulthood.

Furthermore, in line 43, the psychologist formulates a gist of the caller's talk by suggesting a description with strong negative connotations—"orphan" (used figuratively, as Stefan formally had a parent). This description maximizes the severity of the unfortunate childhood circumstances (cf. Potter 1996). The caller accepts the depiction only partially and limits it to an orphanhood "in practice" and "emotionally" (line 44). In the following lines, Stefan formulates another reservation for the psychologist's reformulated description (he had food on the table, line 46), but the psychologist produces an "increment" (Schegloff 1996) to this caller's utterance, designed as a continuation of the caller's turn (line 47: "but there was no one there") and in this way confirms his initial interpretation of the caller as being an orphan (line 43). This time the caller agrees and

confirms the interpretation (line 48). Thus, while negotiating the applicability of the category "orphan" to Stefan's case, the participants negotiate a degree to which an inference of Stefan's membership in the category "neglected child" can be made.

In the extract, the deficient nature of Stefan's childhood is specified and aggravated: the vague description of the insufficient amount of love (lines 19 and 24) is reformulated into the emotionally loaded "orphanhood" (lines 43–48). This work is done in the context of establishing a causal link between Stefan's childhood and adulthood experiences (lines 19–21). Therefore, by choosing and agreeing upon the descriptions which aggravate the caller's vulnerability (when being a child) and maximize the deplorable character of his childhood, the conversation participants imply and work up its potential harmful effects.

In both extracts, the commonsense understanding of family and parental obligations is invoked to allude to the categories of "abused and/or neglected child." The categories are attached to the individual experiences of the callers in order to establish explanatory grounds for their psychological problems in adulthood. This categorial work constitutes social problems work: the culturally shared understanding of a "dysfunctional family" and its consequences for the child are used as an interpretive resource in making sense of individual experiences.

## Documentary Method: Exogenous Causes as an Underlying Pattern

Once participants agreed upon a childhood-grounded account for callers' problems, they could interpret concrete experiences and behaviors in adulthood through the lens of this account. Causes for adult conduct were found in the callers' childhood circumstances which were out of the callers' control. Childhood experiences were understood as inducing individual characteristic patterns of conduct in adulthood such as distorted and deviating from commonsense expectations thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This image of "otherness" was used to reframe callers' conduct, which

might otherwise seem bizarre or abnormal, as understandable and justified. Because rationality is bound up with the grounds for action (Jayyusi 1984), by finding an explanation for the callers' behaviors the conversation participants restored rationality to these behaviors and thus the rationality of their agent—the caller (cf. Karp 1992).

While the episodes from callers' adult life were interpreted on the basis of "what was known" about their childhood, simultaneously, these life episodes appeared to be documentary evidence for the childhood-grounded explanations. The conversation participants shaped an understanding of childhood-induced ways of thinking and behaving as an underlying pattern in the callers' lives. This documentary method of interpretation (Garfinkel 1967; Mannheim 1952) allowed the conversation participants (among other things) to allude to the explanatory framework—that is, the causal link between childhood and adulthood—without asserting it explicitly.

Consider Extract 3, where the psychologist disagrees with the caller's description of her reaction as "absurd" (lines 13–15). In this episode, at the very beginning of the conversation the caller, Anna, brought up her childhood as a part of her problem of loneliness. Anna described her father as a strict and critical person who abused her, her sister, and her mother, and she described her mother as deeply depressed and emotionally remote. Later in the dialogue, the childhood-grounded explanation was elaborated by connecting particular aspects of the caller's problem to particular episodes in her childhood. The extract below shows one such instance.

Extract 3 (caller Anna)

01. **C:** **↑jag vet att när jag var barn tänkte jag ofta att när**
↑I know that when I was a child I often thought that when
02. **nånting <u>bra</u> hände nån gång .h då väntade jag alltid**
something <u>good</u> happened on some occasion .h then I always waited

03. **på straffet snart kommer straffet (.) [kommer] jag ihåg.**
for punishment soon comes the punishment (.) I remember.
04. **RP:** **[ hm. ]**
05. **C:** **jag var helt säker på att .hhhh å: det var när jag fick**
I was totally sure that .hhhh and it was when I had
06. **min dotter då fick min mamma hjärntumör, [.hh] å jag minns**
my daughter then my mum got a brain tumour, .hh and I remember
07. **RP:** **[mm.]**
08. **C:** **att (.) jag nånstans kopplade ihop (.) det med ett straff.**
that (.) I somehow connected (.) that with a punishment.
09. **RP:** **.hhhhh ett straff för [vad då?**
.hhhhh a punishment [for what?
10. **C:** **[för glädjen över att jag fått en dotter.**
[for the joy of having a daughter.
11. **RP:** **a::**
12. **(2.2)**
13. **C:** **det låter absurt [men jag tror att] a: jag tänkte så då.**
it sounds absurd but I think that yeah I thought so then.
14. **RP:** **[ .hhhh ]**
15. **RP:** **.hh jag tycker inte att det låter absurt (.) inte utifrån**
.hh I don't think that it sounds absurd (.) not considering
16. **din historia .hh för du [har] lärt dig att (0.8)**
your story .hh because you [have] learnt that (0.8)
17. **C:** **[nej]**
[ no ]
18. **RP:** **att bra stunder (0.6) ögonblick av gemenskap e**
that good moments (0.6) instances of togetherness are
19. **ingenting självklart för dig.**
nothing natural for you.
20. **C:** **nej det e inte självklart. (.) [nej.**
no it isn't natural. (.) [no.
21. **RP:** **[har aldrig varit.**
[has never been.
22. **C:** **nej.**
no.

Anna, the caller, invokes a recollection from her childhood (lines 1–3) and compares it to a more recent situation in her adult life (lines 5–10). Anna's experiences in both the childhood recollection and the situation in adulthood are portrayed as irrational. The irrationality is implied rather than stated explicitly. Anna reports that when she was a child she waited for punishment after "something good happened" (line 2). According to common sense, punishment is something anticipated after bad—rather than good—things happening, while an expected reaction to good things is quite different from awaiting punishment. By bringing together "good things" and "anticipation of punishment," Anna implies that her experience was unreasonable. Thus, Anna portrays herself as having been a child with irrational reactions and not able to experience joy. Note that the description is emphasized by the extreme case formulation "always" (line 2). In the context of the caller's earlier narration about abusive father and depressed mother, Anna's irrational thoughts when she was a child are heard as resulting from her childhood situation rather than her personality traits.

In lines 5–10, Anna implies that her thoughts in adulthood were irrational in the same way as her thoughts when she was a child: she thought of her mother's illness as punishment for the joy of having got a daughter. The irrationality of the depicted situation is accentuated by the psychologist's follow-up question "a punishment for what?" (line 9). Anna reports her childhood and adulthood recollections side by side and thereby alludes to a causal connection between her childhood and adulthood experiences. She implies that her irrational thoughts after giving birth to her daughter can be understood using the childhood-grounded account for her problem which was discussed and agreed upon earlier in the conversation.

After getting only minimal acknowledgement from the therapist in response to her story (line 11), Anna assumes that the sensibleness of her adult experience may be questioned (line 13: "it sounds absurd"). The therapist shows an intention to respond to the caller immediately after her

description “absurd” (line 14) but withholds his response until the caller finishes her turn, and then disagrees with her (line 15: “I don’t think that it sounds absurd”). The psychologist then brings in Anna’s life story as an explanation for her reactions (lines 15–16: “considering your story”) and formulates a specification of Anna’s problem. While the caller reports the two events side by side, implying but not stating the connection between them, the psychologist verbalizes this connection: “because you have learnt” (line 16)—alluding to the childhood with parents who were either physically or emotionally absent. He connects Anna’s example about “good moments” (compare lines 2 and 18) to what was discussed earlier in the conversation (before the extract)—Anna’s longing for “togetherness” (line 18). The psychologist implies that a reaction that might seem “absurd” in the case of a person with a different (and more fortunate) life story is reasonable or at least explainable in Anna’s case: something that would be natural for that other person (“instances of togetherness,” line 18) is not natural for Anna (line 19). The image of “otherness” is used to rationalize and normalize the caller’s thoughts and feelings in view of her life story.

After Anna agrees with the therapist’s description (line 20), the therapist adds the time perspective that incorporates Anna’s childhood: “has never been” (line 21). Childhood experiences are called upon (by both conversation participants) to account for Anna’s reactions in adulthood, which otherwise may seem bizarre. In this way, the source of harm and discontent is relocated from the caller herself (her thoughts and reactions) to the exogenous circumstances of her childhood; the participants accomplish a discursive process of “victimization” (Holstein and Miller 1990)—they assign the caller status of a victim of her childhood experiences. This “victim work” distances Anna from her irrational and self-harming conduct and allows her to maintain the identity of a rational and reasonable actor. At the same time, by shaping an understanding of the learned in childhood dysfunctional thoughts as the pattern underlying Anna’s conduct, the conversation participants demonstrate how a particular childhood situation (with an abusive father and an emotionally absent

mother) can be injurious. Thus, they jointly assemble a case of the social problem of abused and neglected children who grow into adults with psychological problems.

## Inner Child Metaphor: Animating Childhood Memories

An important part of the psychologist's work consisted in motivating and empowering callers for personal change. In the cases where childhood-grounded reasoning was invoked, this empowering work could be particularly challenging in view of the deterministic nature of the account for the callers' problems: the cause of the problems lied in childhood which could not be changed. As Holstein and Miller (1990) observe, while providing an account for one's actions, attributing behavior to exogenous causes comes at the cost of positioning the person as a passive and helpless recipient of harm and thus "disabling" him or her. The passive position implies incapacity to manage one's own reactions, which are rooted in conditions beyond the person's control. In *The Radio Psychologist*, the empowering work was accomplished through animating childhood memories as entities that are separate from but still "inside" the callers (cf. Weinberg 1997). This was routinely achieved using two metaphors: *old voices* and *the inner child.* The metaphor of voices was applied to the description of callers' thoughts, which were understood as rooted in childhood, in order to "externalize" these thoughts (Edwards and Potter 1992) and attribute them to significant figures such as parents ("It's not mine, but my father's voice is saying that I'm worthless"). One's thoughts reconsidered as someone else's voices became manageable, as they could be subject to resistance ("Chase those voices away like birds!"). The metaphor of the inner child was, in turn, used to dissociate from and also embrace one's childhood emotional experiences.

When used as accounts for unwished or "inappropriate" conduct, the metaphors of old voices and the inner child animated childhood memories as exogenous forces within the individual

(cf. Weinberg 1997). The conversation participants treated "old voices" and "the inner child" as existing within the callers but still separate from the callers' selves. While these entities could take control over the callers' conduct and make the callers behave irrationally, they could also be conquered and taken care of. Both metaphors allowed further explicating of the mechanisms through which childhood memories could affect one's adult life. At the same time, they allowed positioning the callers as being able to take control over their memories, thoughts, and feelings (cf. Karp 1992).

Extract 4 shows an example of the psychologist using the metaphor of the inner child to specify a caller's problem. This example comes from the same radio conversation as Extract 1, where the caller, Maria, said that she grew up with alcoholic parents. Extract 4 is taken from later in the conversation, after Maria revealing that she felt lonely and abandoned as a child ("abandoned" in line 9) and still feels lonely today, as she has no friends.

Extract 4 (caller Maria)

01. **RP: kan du se att den lilla flickan nånstans finns kvar hos dig?**
    can you see that this little girl is still somewhere inside of you?
02. **C: .hhh hhhh.**
03. **RP: får du kontakt? (.) med henne ibland?**
    do you have contact? (.) with her sometimes?
04. **C: NE:J: faktiskt inte, (.) jag tror jag skjutit undan henne lite.**
    NO: actually not, (.) I think I have pushed her aside a bit.
05. **(1.5)**
06. **C: jag har inte kommit på den tanken faktiskt.**
    I haven't thought about this actually.
07. **RP: å när vi pratade om det nu att det kanske finns (1.0)**
    and when we talked about this now that there is maybe (1.0)

08. **en del av dig som fortfarande, (0.6) att den här lilla flickan**

a part of you which still, (0.6) that this little girl

09. **som faktiskt var väldigt övergiven å ledsen, (0.3) har följt**

who actually was very abandoned and sad, (0.3) has followed

10. **med dig nån- på nåt sätt [( )] i livet å på[verkar dig.**

you som- in some way ( ) in your life and affects you.

11. **C:** **[↑M::: ]** **[↑M:::**

12. **RP: .hh å jag tänker det här att (0.3) när vi är barn, (0.2)**

.hh and I think about this that (0.3) when we are children, (0.2)

13. **så: tänker vi så.**

then we think so.

14. **(1.0)**

15. **RP: vad e det [för fel-] vad e det för fel på mig?**

what's [wrong-] what's wrong with me?

16. **C:** **[ ↑hur. ]**

[↑how. ]

17. **C: .hhhhh**

18. **RP: varför vill inte min mamma (0.2) bry sig om mig, eller min pappa=**

why doesn't my mum want (0.2) to care for me, or my dad=

19. **C: =↑A::**

=↑YEAH::

20. **RP: a ja- jag tror ju då att att du som alla (.) eller som**

yeah I- I surely think that that you like all (.) or like

21. **de flesta andra barn, h. (0.6) utgick från (.) att skälen till att**

most other children, h. (0.6) assumed (.) that the reason why

22. **inte din mamma (.) såg dig eller (0.4) visade att hon ville**

your mum didn't (.) see you or (0.4) show that she wanted

23. **ha dig, (0.5) det måste bero på att det e nåt fel på dig.**

you, (0.5) this must be because something's wrong with you.

24. **C: ja: precis. (.) å det e ju det e som jag känner igen nu.**

yeah: exactly. (.) and this is exactly what I recognize now.

25. **.hhh att det e ju likadant idag.**

.hhh that it is surely the same today.

In the first line, the psychologist invokes the image of "the little girl" (line 1) whom Maria, the caller, once was and who may still be a part of her. While this image embodies the connection between Maria's past and present, it also disconnects Maria from her memories as something that is separated from her and that she can "have contact with" (line 3). After the caller accepts this line of reasoning (line 4: "I have pushed her aside") and indicates its novelty for her (line 6), the psychologist elaborates her interpretation, suggesting that the child, whom Maria was, "has followed" her and still "affects" her (lines 9–10). Specifically, the therapist alludes to an earlier part of the conversation (line 7: "when we talked about this now") where Maria became sad (line 9) when she talked about her mother who had never shown any love to her.

After the caller's emphatic acknowledgements (line 11), the psychologist further elaborates her interpretation. First, she formulates it as a more general pattern for children (note the shift to impersonal "we" in lines 12–13 and "me/my" in lines 15 and 18), thereby presumably orienting to a broader radio audience (cf. Hutchby 2006). The psychologist describes a child's experience of finding fault with him/herself as common (lines 12–13: "when we are children then we think so") implying at the same time that the experience is "wrong." This is achieved by portraying children as responsible agents who search for causes of their parents' inattention in themselves. In the Western culture, features bound to the category "children" are innocence, lack of responsibility, and dependence on parents (Hockey and James 1993). Caring for their children is, in turn, a major obligation attached to the categories "mum" and "dad." By presenting a reverse picture where

"mum" and "dad" do not "want to care for" their child (line 18) while the child feels responsible for the actions of her parents (line 15), the therapist conveys that the child's experience is irrational—that is, it is inconsistent with the expectations attached to the complementary categories of "child" and "mum/dad."

After the caller's display of understanding (line 19), the therapist devises her interpretation as more specific to Maria's case (lines 20–23). While earlier in the conversation (not included in the extract) Maria hypothesized that "something was wrong with her" because she could not make friends, the therapist suggests instead that Maria's belief about her wrongness does not have any reasonable grounds and is instead a learned self-attitude originating from how Maria's parents treated her (lines 18–23). The wrongness is thus (re)attributed from the caller herself to her childhood, namely her mother's psychologically harmful neglect (lines 22–23).

By suggesting that the little girl, Maria once was, is still present in her, the psychologist animates the childhood memories as existing "inside" Maria but still separate from her. Maria's agency in relation to the "little girl inside" is portrayed as ambiguous: Maria may choose to have contact with her (line 3) or push her aside (line 4) while, at the same time, this little girl makes Maria feel and think in a particular way (lines 20–25). This ambiguity, where neither Maria has full control over her inner child, nor the inner child has full control over adult Maria, appears to constitute a major condition for establishing the childhood-grounded account of Maria's problem while, simultaneously, positioning Maria as able to cope with her problem (cf. Weinberg 1997). The metaphor of "the inner child" provides for the possibility of the caller relating to her childhood memories as something external to her. In the further unfolding of the dialogue, the metaphor is used to formulate a remedy for the caller, who is advised to imagine talking to and taking care of "the little girl inside her."

# DISCUSSION

In 16 out of 42 episodes of *The Radio Psychologist* broadcast during 2014, participants discussed problematic experiences in adulthood—such as feelings of worthlessness or loneliness—as being grounded in the circumstances of an unfortunate childhood. This reasoning was anchored in the cultural image of a child as vulnerable and compliant with adult influences, as well as in the moral obligations to love and protect, attached to parental roles. By agreeing that callers' parents violated these obligations in some (or every) way, the conversation participants shaped an understanding of the callers' childhoods as harmful and consequential for their adulthood. The reasoning rested on the accentuated asymmetry and complementarity of the roles "child" and "parent" and differed, for example, from counselling strategies described by Cromdal and colleagues (2017), where a counsellor invited a teenage client to "try to be an adult" in relation to her mother, thus reducing the asymmetry between a child and a parent and even reversing the family roles.

Childhood-grounded explanations for callers' troubles in *The Radio Psychologist* are consonant with psychodynamic theories, such as Freudian psychoanalysis and attachment theory (Bowlby 1958), according to which the parent-child relationship influences the child's subsequent social and emotional development, including his or her well-being in adulthood (e.g., Hazan and Shaver 1987). These theories appeared to be invoked in the program in their popularized, rather than scientific versions. Childhood-grounded explanations were often introduced by callers themselves, and the radio psychologists never framed them as expert-specific knowledge, for example by using psychological terminology. Hence, the study shows how these theories penetrate everyday life in the form of commonsense interpretive resources used to make sense of individual experiences (cf. Linde 1987; Moscovici 2008). The analyses have explicated how these resources were interactionally mobilized in the program to produce explanations for personal problems in adulthood. The psychological theories about child development are, in turn, grounded in the

commonsense understanding of childhood as a special period of life, while they simultaneously inform and foster prescriptive commonsense knowledge about child–parent relationships and the concept of the social problem of child abuse and neglect.

The paper elucidates social problems work and, particularly, "communicative social problems work" (Holstein and Gubrium 2003) by attending to the interactional detail of how the particular social problem category of child abuse and neglect is actualized and assigned to individual life cases. More specifically, the paper has explicated several aspects of social problems work in detail. First, the paper has shown how victimization can be accomplished interactionally—that is, how the understanding of putative childhood conditions as harmful and injurious can be communicated and negotiated (cf. Holstein and Miller 1990). By reaching an understanding of a caller's parents as neglectful or abusive and the caller as subsequently severely harmed by his or her unfortunate childhood, the interaction participants positioned the caller as a victim of exogenous forces beyond his or her control. Second, the analysis has revealed that, in *The Radio Psychologist,* the understanding of child abuse and neglect could be negotiated and broadened to embrace cases of minor or less severe maltreatment (such as a lack of love or emotional contact with parents). This is distinct from other media contexts, such as news reports, where stories of child abuse and neglect usually take the form of extreme "horror stories" (Johnson 1995). Finally, the paper has explicated one particular way of how an understanding of childhood conditions as injurious can be shaped, namely how one's unfortunate childhood comes to be understood as consequential for his or her adult life.

In *The Radio Psychologist*, the causal link between childhood and adulthood was established to explain problematic experiences and to suggest a different perspective on the situations and experiences described by callers. Because causality and continuity are the major principles of coherence used in organizing life stories (Linde 1987), by establishing a causal link

between childhood memories and adult problems the conversation participants jointly developed a coherent narrative of the callers' life stories. Through this biographical work they also produced a sense of the coherence and meaningfulness of the callers' identity (cf. Benwell and Stokoe 2006).

At the same time, continual allusions to childhood in the conversation "documented" the childhood-grounded explanation as observable in, and applicable to, various aspects of the callers' experiences. Davis (1986) observed that in a therapeutic assessment interview, after having suggested what constituted the client's problem, the therapist linked various events described by the caller to this problem to establish "empirical evidence" for it. That is, the therapist reformulated the client's descriptions so as to shape them as instances of the problem. A similar phenomenon was observable in the conversations with the radio psychologist; here, once the childhood-grounded explanation was established, it was applied to various aspects of the callers' problematic experiences. This, in turn, further confirmed and legitimized the explanation as an underlying pattern running throughout the callers' lives. In other words, the childhood-grounded explanation was used and, simultaneously, reinforced as a "scheme of interpretation" (Garfinkel 1967; Schütz 1970): the caller's experiences were treated as recognizable and intelligible manifestations of the familiar problem of child abuse and neglect.

The literature suggests that individual stories are a way to illustrate as well as legitimize social problem categories (e.g., Loseke 2010; Maynard 1988), including the social problem of child abuse and neglect (Johnson 1995). By explicating in detail how family ideology—particularly, normative images of parent–child relationships—was applied to callers' actual experiences, this study has elucidated the micropolitics of interpretative practice: it has demonstrated how family meanings are collaboratively achieved and constituted in the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Furthermore, when transmitted through broadcasting, cultural concepts and ways of reasoning are reproduced and promoted, shaping public knowledge.

While therapeutic conversations in *The Radio Psychologist* drew upon the cultural knowledge about childhood experiences and their bearing on adult life in order to make sense of callers' personal troubles, they, at the same time, reflexively fed back to and popularized this knowledge. The childhood-grounded reasoning was also reproduced in the way episodes were described on the program's web page, as well as in radio listeners' comments on this page where the listeners shared their own experiences similar to those of the callers (see Thell 2018). In this way, the childhood-grounded reasoning was repeatedly confirmed, re-established, legitimized, elaborated, and promoted through individual life stories. The interpretive work with personal troubles in the program thus constituted popular knowledge and culture in the making.

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## Appendix: The Transcription Symbols

| | |
|---|---|
| RP: | Speaker identification: radio psychologist (RP), caller (C) |
| [ ] | Starting point and end point of overlapping talk |
| (1.2) | Silence measured in seconds |
| (.) | Pause of less than 0.2 second |
| = | No gap between two utterances |
| . | Falling or final intonation |
| , | Level or continuing intonation |
| ? | Rising intonation |
| word | Stress or emphasis |
| wo:rd | Prolongation of sound |
| WORD | Loud voice |
| *word* | Low voice |

| | |
|---|---|
| ↑word | Rise in pitch or volume |
| wo- | An abrupt cut-off |
| .h | Inhalation |
| h. | Exhalation |
| ( ) | Unclear segment of talk |