



Communicating and categorising 'kidnap' incidents in UK police emergency calls: a conversation analytic study

Sarah Atkins, Emma Richardson, Joanne Traynor & Felicity Deamer

To cite this article: Sarah Atkins, Emma Richardson, Joanne Traynor & Felicity Deamer (15 Aug 2024): Communicating and categorising 'kidnap' incidents in UK police emergency calls: a conversation analytic study, *Policing and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/10439463.2024.2386282](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2024.2386282)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2024.2386282>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 15 Aug 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Communicating and categorising ‘kidnap’ incidents in UK police emergency calls: a conversation analytic study

Sarah Atkins ^a, Emma Richardson ^b, Joanne Traynor ^c and Felicity Deamer ^a

^aAston Institute for Forensic Linguistics, Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics Aston University, Birmingham, UK;

^bDepartment of Communication and Media, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK; ^cFaculty of Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK

ABSTRACT

This study of police emergency calls in the UK addresses the interactional work conducted when dealing with reports of kidnap. In the UK, kidnap is classed as a type of ‘crime-in-action’, known to be complex to categorise and code for the appropriate police response. Using the qualitative method of ‘conversation analysis’, we address this complexity through analysing a dataset of anonymised emergency calls which are, at some point during the call or subsequent police investigation, categorised as ‘kidnap’. Analysing the calls, their categorisations and the accompanying incident logs, we aim to understand the difficulties that can arise in identifying this type of high-stakes incident at the first point of police contact. We find callers encode differing levels of ‘entitlement’ in requests for police assistance, with potential effects on call-handlers’ decisions about kidnap categorisations. We also observe interactional difficulties in establishing information about the incident, either through the caller’s displayed lack of knowledge or certainty, difficulty in producing turns or sometimes resistance to providing further information. These features may render the call-handler’s task of categorising incidents as ‘kidnap’ more challenging. Our identification of these communicative patterns has potential benefits for call-handlers’ practices in the police control room, providing an evidence-base from real-life talk for training. The findings also have implications at an institutional level, as they shed light on the negotiations that underly ‘categorisation’ work in policing, where there may sometimes only be a tacit understanding of how crime categories are decided during initial reports from the public.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 27 November 2023
Accepted 25 July 2024

KEYWORDS

emergency calls; kidnap;
conversation analysis

1. Introduction

Incidents of kidnap, defined as the taking of another person without their consent or a lawful reason (Law Commission 2011) are serious, high stakes situations. Police services in the UK classify such incidents as ‘crimes-in-action’; incidents occurring in real-time, which potentially present a threat to life during the course of the police investigation, a category that may also include incidents like abduction, product contamination and terrorism. Crimes-in-action require specific response protocols but, to enact these, an unfolding incident must first be correctly identified. One route for members of the public to initially report possible crimes-in-action is via police emergency phone lines, where calls will be fielded by communications officers as a first point of contact. Indeed, the Anti Kidnap and Extortion Unit of the UK’s National Crime Agency directs, ‘You can report any instances of kidnapping or extortion directly to

CONTACT Sarah Atkins  s.atkins@aston.ac.uk  Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

police by calling 999 in an emergency and make it clear that you are reporting a KIDNAP ... ' (NCA n.d.). However, kidnaps are complex incidents which come in many forms and contexts, such as stranger/ ransom kidnaps, criminal vendetta kidnaps by organised crime groups and trafficking (NCA n.d.), with policy-makers and ethnographic research suggesting they can be difficult for callers and call-handlers to categorise (Leeny and Mueller-Johnson 2010, Traynor 2022). Miscategorisations due to these difficulties can cause delays in responding, with potentially life-threatening consequences.

Communication may be a central source of this complexity. Emergency calls are fielded through spoken interaction with a call-handler, who initiates a written incident log to pass to a dispatch-officer. Our study addresses a central question of what it is that may be difficult about categorising calls reporting kidnap, applying insights and methods from conversation analysis (CA) to examine the communicative patterns in the calls themselves, alongside the written incident logs and categories applied by communications officers. The analysis provides a valuable 'profile' of these calls and an understanding of how categories may be arrived at through interaction.

1.1. Background – communication and categorisation in UK police control rooms

Members of the UK public can make emergency 999 calls and non-emergency 101 calls to the police, which are directed to a regional 'force control room' (FCR), where communications officers provide the link to the provision of police assistance (Gormley, 2020). Communications officers fall into two roles: call-handlers and dispatch-officers. Call-handlers initially receive calls and interact directly with the member of the public reporting an incident. Call-handlers receive six weeks initial training, which consists of basic law, police policy and procedure and police IT systems. Following further training, call-handlers can later progress to the role of dispatch-officer, the operators who engage directly with the police, rather than the public, to deploy a response to incidents (Antunes and Scott 1981, Traynor 2022). Dispatch-officers use the information provided by call-handlers about the incident and, in the FCR studied here, are in a separated space from call-handlers (Traynor 2022).

During this institutional process, it is vital that call-handlers receiving calls obtain information from the caller to categorise the type of incident and code its urgency (see Garcia and Parmer 1999, Larsen 2013). Following a framework provided by the National Standard for Incident Recording (NPIA 2011), call-handlers in the UK abstract salient facts from callers, assigning an incident category and response grade in an incident log on a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. Incident logs contain mandatory fields (see Table 1) that the call-handler must complete, including category codes aligned to the National Incident Category List (NICL) to describe an event (NPIA 2011), also used by the institution in tracking types of incidents reported. The call-handler also fills in a 'free text' field, a summary narrative recontextualising the caller's description of events for the institutional record. In this way, the incident log is the call-handler's representation of the caller's report through a structured arrangement of signs and codes (Traynor 2022). Once the mandatory category fields are populated, call-handlers transfer the incident log to dispatch-officers via the CAD system.

Once transferred, dispatch-officers interpret the coding and make a decision on whether to deploy police, aiming to mitigate vulnerability, threat, harm, and risk, whilst managing the organisation's resources. The incident category initially selected by call-handlers, along with other recorded information, therefore informs the institutional trajectory of a reported matter, which for calls reporting kidnap includes swiftly informing senior officers and enacting a specific protocol to investigate a life-threatening crime-in-action.

Table 1. The incident log mandatory fields.

Incident log mandatory field	Call-handler action
Location	Establish event location, populate address field
Caller	Establish caller's details, populate the caller's details
Category	Choose the category most closely aligned with the reported matter from a drop-down menu of 80 crime and non-crime categories
Response grade	Choose a police response code from a drop-down menu of five options to indicate how swiftly police officers should respond

Categorisation therefore represents a centrally important institutional activity for those processing emergency calls but it can be complex work. Calls made to the police have been found to be unclear and disordered in the way callers present information (Manning 1982), a finding that persists in more recent research, which identifies difficulties for call-handlers in categorising incidents (Lumsden and Black 2018, Traynor 2022). Traynor (2022) observed that calls requesting assistance may indicate overlapping categories and that categories may share a range of characteristics, leading to miscategorisations that potentially delay the police response. In early studies of policing, Lipsky (1980), argued that the decision to code a matter for attendance required the application of significant discretion, rather than simply the transformation of policy into practice. Traynor's (2022) more recent ethnographic study revealed the tension this process creates between call-handlers and dispatch-officers; dispatchers often expressed a mistrust of call-handlers' categorisations of incidents and were unsure what risk lurked beneath the surface of a particular incident category having not heard the initial call. We focus on communication in the context of this institutional process for calls which *might* be categorised as 'kidnap' and the challenges in making this significant categorisation.

1.2. Spoken interaction in emergency calls

There has been considerable research on communication in emergency calls, much of it in the field of conversation analysis (henceforth, CA), a qualitative sociological method that examines how we perform everyday social activities through talk (Sidnell and Stivers 2012). CA identifies the patterns and 'orderliness' that can be found in naturally occurring, real-life interaction, using recordings and researcher-produced transcripts to examine this in close detail. The emphasis is on looking at how the turn-by-turn talk achieves social actions, by analysing participants in their everyday activities (Sacks 1992). Insights from CA research have been increasingly applied to institutional workplace communication, including areas such as crisis communication, providing recommendations for practice (e.g. Sikveland *et al.* 2022).

Emergency calls have been a particularly fruitful area of research for CA, in part because the interactions are well-suited to the approach; they are relatively time-bound spoken interactions in which actions are largely achieved through talk. They are also routinely recorded, as part of the 'business' of the institution, making it possible for analysts to examine 'naturally-occurring' data. Early work such as Whalen *et al.* (1988), Whalen and Zimmerman (1987, 1990), Zimmerman (1984, 1992) established that there is a sequential organisation to routine emergency calls, with five distinct phases:

- (1) Opening/Identification
- (2) Complaint/Request
- (3) Interrogative Series
- (4) Response/Promise of assistance
- (5) Closing

First is the 'institutional identification and opening' (e.g. 'Police, what's your emergency'), followed by the 'complaint/request' phase, the point at which the caller states their reason for the call and requests assistance (Tracy 1997, Raymond 2014). The caller's turn at this point tends to be interpreted as a *de facto* request for help by the call-handler, even if this 'request' is not explicitly stated (Heritage and Clayman 2010, Tennent 2021). In routine emergency calls, callers are generally understood as needing to design requests to be hearable as a genuine 'policeable' matter, in order to gain a police response (Zimmerman 1984, Garcia and Parmer 1999, Raymond 2014) and minimise the possibility for misunderstanding and delay (Tracy 1997). Following the caller's request, the call-handler typically moves to the 'interrogative-series', asking questions for further information which orient callers to the institutional task of determining whether the incident is a policeable matter that requires a response (Bolanos-Carpio's 2020, Whalen and Zimmerman 1990, Zimmerman 1984, p. 214–222). The call-handler's response/promise of assistance tends to come towards the end of the interaction, although as we shall see this can come earlier in crimes-in-action calls.

During requests, callers typically communicate a degree of urgency (Whalen and Zimmerman 1987, Bolaños-Carpio 2020) and 'entitlement' to receive assistance. 'Entitlement' describes the way in which we encode a sense of our right to make a request (Drew and Walker 2010, Larsen 2013, Raymond 2014) and the stakes we hold in this being granted (Curl and Drew 2008). CA research has explored the range of linguistic choices available to speakers for communicating differing levels of 'entitlement' (see Curl and Drew 2008). In these emergency calls, a high stakes and high entitlement request might be designed as, 'I need the police to come now, I am being held against my will', in comparison to a low stakes and low entitlement request such as, 'I'm calling to see if ...'. How the initial request is presented has an impact on how the emergency call unfolds. For example, in a study of calls to Danish emergency services, Larsen (2013) found that callers who gave minimal details of the incident but made high entitlement requests tended to elicit 'dispatch-relevant' questions from the call-handler, indicating a police response was likely (despite the lack of information). Low-entitlement requests, however, elicited more 'incident-relevant' questions from the call-handler (seeking more information about the incident) before confirming whether a police response would be sent. This suggests the likely outcome for the call can be predicted from the interaction at these early stages, findings corroborated by Kent and Antaki (2019, p. 641), who further show that the call-handler's first substantive questions, 'incorporate more than just considerations of request entitlement' but are also oriented towards evaluating the seriousness and the institutional relevance of the request (p. 656).

Callers also need to provide a basis for their request (Fele 2023) and are expected to have some access to knowledge about the incident that the call-handler does not. In conveying their knowledge, callers communicate their 'epistemic stance' to the information they provide, that is, their commitment to the knowledge or information they are relaying. Knowledge can be said to be either 'type 1', first-hand or 'type 2', second-hand knowledge (Pomerantz 1980). For calls reporting kidnap, an example such as 'I'm not sure, but I think I saw a woman being bundled into a car', would be a type 2, second-hand knowable, framing the knowledgeable status of the caller as being much lower than the example, 'I am being held against my will', a type 1, first-hand knowable. First-hand knowledge can usually be presented in much more *certain* terms, but is less common in calls reporting possible kidnaps where, as we will see, the caller is not usually the first-party. Additionally, we can 'downgrade' or 'upgrade' our epistemic stance as we talk, for example using 'it seems so' to downplay certainty if asked to confirm information (Heritage and Raymond 2005). There is a general difference then, identified in the CA literature, in the ways we tend to frame knowledge that we have stronger or weaker access to (Pomerantz 1980), which in emergency calls places an institutional burden on the call-handler to discern the policeable nature of the request from uncertain information, particularly during the interrogative-series when an exchange of knowledge takes place between caller and call-handler. Through this process, the call-handler and caller agree a mutually acceptable description of the incident, (Zimmerman 1984, p. 214), providing the basis for the incident categorisation. If a caller displays a lack of knowledge or fails to adequately account for their request, it increases the likelihood that the call will be shut down without the request being fulfilled (see Fele 2023), raising the potential of not recognising or miscategorising complex incidents (Garcia and Parmer 1999).

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for emergency calls to be made by people who have limited knowledge of an incident. Here, the interaction becomes a delicate matter where the caller must carefully frame their access to knowledge by displaying 'sufficient entitlement to make a request even under conditions of limited or uncertain information' (Fele 2023, p.111). For second-hand knowledge, for example, we can refer to another party as the origin of our knowledge (Bergmann 1992) or use a 'reportative' epistemic stance to account for our knowledge (Mushin 2001). It is exactly this type of 'second-hand' knowledge which becomes important in the calls reporting kidnap we present in our analysis.

2. Methods and data

CA requires the analysis of real spoken interaction. We were granted access by a UK police service to 48 digital recordings of emergency calls (totalling over 600 minutes) and the accompanying incident

logs. Recordings of emergency calls are collected as part of the routine work of the organisation for training and evaluation purposes but are clearly sensitive data for research. Recontacting callers to gain specific consent is not possible for such data and so permissions must be based on the handling of data by the police and strict ethical policies for protecting the identities of callers and call-handlers. Careful data protection processes were followed and data processing agreements were drawn up by the police, ensuring protocols for the removal of all personal information before transcription through blanking out sections on the audio. Identifying details have been altered or removed and where names and locations appear in the transcripts, these are all pseudonyms. The project received ethical approval at Aston University (AIFL-REC-21-010).

The 48 calls (made between 2020 and 2021) were selected by the partner police force, who identified them on the basis that, at some point during the progression of the incident, they were categorised as a kidnap, i.e. 'crime-in-action'. In terms of their categorisations, they can be grouped as;

- Calls initially categorised as a 'kidnap' by the call-handler and later closed by another officer under the same category, suggesting the call-handler's initial categorisation was correct – 26 calls of this type.
- Calls initially categorised as one type of incident (such as 'concern for welfare', 'missing persons' etc., i.e. not initially a 'kidnap') by the call-handler but which were later recategorised and responded to by the force as a kidnap incident, suggesting a potential error in early categorisation – 19 calls of this type.
- Calls which were initially categorised as a 'kidnap' by the call-handler but were later recategorised as a different type of incident, suggesting an initial error in initially being categorised as 'kidnap' – 3 calls of this type.

Just over half, 54%, of the dataset, therefore consisted of calls that could be said to be correctly categorised as 'kidnap' from the outset since they retained this as their closing category, giving a sample from which to understand how speakers successfully dealt with the communicative demands of these calls in identifying the appropriate incident. The next 40% of the sample represented potentially missed categorisations of kidnap at the initial point of contact – this section of the sample provided an opportunity to see where interactional difficulties may lead to initial mis-categorisations. The remaining 6% of the sample were those classified as 'kidnap' from the initial point of contact but were later recategorised to another type of incident. The specific opening and closing categories of the calls are provided in [Table 2](#).

The calls were transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions. Transcription is an important analytical step in CA which enables close analysis of the turn-by-turn talk, including showing features such as pauses, intonation, pace, and non-lexical vocalisations (such as the sounds associated with crying (see Hepburn 2004)). The idea is to represent as much as possible of both *what* is said but also *how* it is said, since this forms a meaningful part of the interaction between speakers (Jefferson 2004).

Table 2. Opening and closing categorisations of calls in the dataset.

Opening categorisation by the call-handler		Closing categorisation recorded in incident log		Total (n = 48)
<i>Kidnap</i>		<i>Kidnap</i>		26
Other:	<i>Assault</i>	<i>Kidnap</i>		1
	<i>Concern for welfare</i>			8
	<i>Fight</i>			4
	<i>Firearm</i>			1
	<i>Missing persons</i>			2
	<i>Offensive weapon</i>			1
	<i>Suspicious circumstances</i>			1
<i>Kidnap</i>		Other:	<i>Concern for welfare</i>	1
			<i>Mental health</i>	1
			<i>Sex offence</i>	1

3. Analysis

During our initial analysis, through a repeated listening to the calls to identify phenomena of interest and to build collections, we became interested in the ways in which callers displayed difficulties with institutional requirements to provide information about an incident. We relate this, in part, to how callers position themselves to the incident. Kevoe-Feldman (2019, p. 235) highlights that emergency dispatcher training outlines four types of callers:

- first party (the caller has the problem);
- second party (the caller is directly involved in or close to the problem);
- third party (the callers are not directly involved or close to the problem);
- fourth party (other public service agencies that relay information about the problem).

Importantly, the majority of the calls in our dataset (40 of the 48) are made by callers who could be said to be 'second-' or 'third-parties', who are reporting on behalf of others or have witnessed an incident where the victim may or may not be known to them. Second- or third-party caller positions could sometimes be hard to distinguish in this dataset but generally, where a person called reporting an unfolding incident currently being witnessed, often involving a friend or family member being taken in front of them, we classified the report as second-party due to the immediate proximity to the incident to them. Where the caller was reporting that they had received information about a person being taken, this was classed as third-party due to the greater distance from the unfolding incident, although it is worth noting that these could be ambiguous, particularly where the callers reported being asked to pay money and may therefore be thought of as more directly involved in the crime-in-action. Nevertheless, what is important in terms of the communication here was that the majority did not position themselves as first-party callers (only 8 of the 48 were callers reporting their own kidnaps, usually after the event). Reporting on behalf of others is known to have an effect on how a caller must frame their knowledge of an incident (Fele 2023). In the next two analytic sections, we depict the difficulties that occurred in two types of second- and third-party caller reports;

- Callers (usually third-party) display uncertainty in reporting a potential incident (often accompanied by displaying a low entitlement to police assistance and uncertainty over whether it is a policeable incident at all) – 14 examples, 6 of which were categorised as 'kidnaps' from the outset (Section 3.1).
- Callers (usually second-party) design an initial request that demonstrates urgency and high entitlement to a police response, but are unable or unwilling to respond to information-seeking questions from the call-handler – 11 examples, 7 of which were categorised as 'kidnaps' from the outset (Section 3.2).

In each section, we show how the information provided in the calls could result in challenges for the call-handlers who must categorise these incidents.

3.1. 'Apparently he says ...': Third-parties communicating uncertainty

Calls in which the caller displays low certainty and low entitlement to police assistance, were the most common in the dataset and, since more than half of these types were initially miscategorised, important to look at when establishing why this category of crime may be difficult for call-handlers to confidently identify during initial reporting. We look in detail at the openings to two calls of this type, both of which were initially categorised by the call-handler as a 'concern for welfare' (which still merits a police response) but later reclassified and responded to by officers as more serious 'kidnap' incidents, changes which were noted in the incident logs quoted below.

3.1.1 Extract 1 – uncertainty over the incident

Extract 1 shows the opening 30 seconds of an emergency call. This is a third-party report, made by the potential victim's sibling.

Extract 1

01 HNDL: *Anon* Police what's your emergency.
 02 (0.4)
 03 CALL: Hello yeah I've just had a phone call from my brother,
 04 (0.3) u:m he doesn't know where he is but apparently he
 05 says he's being held by people?
 06 (0.2) and they're no- they're beating him up and he-
 07 they won't let him go until he pays them money that he
 08 owes them?
 09 (1.6)
 10 HNDL: Alright and y- you don't know where he is,
 11 (0.2)
 12 CALL: >Well no I've just literally got his telephone number
 13 but to be honest I don't really know what to do I have
 14 to- he's wanting me to pay the money over which is fine
 15 I don't mind but< (0.2) but obviously I don't know what's
 16 going to happen (.) if this- when this money gets there,
 17 (0.8)
 18 HNDL: R[ight le- me take let] me take your details.
 19 CALL: [it's difficult]
 20 HNDL: What's your home postcode.
[8 lines omitted - address and location given]
 29 HNDL: Right well the police are num- gonna need to come and see
 30 ↑you aren't they.
 31 (0.6)
 32 CALL: Okay yeah I mean they won't be able to come: (.) °er here to
 33 work°. Can I not- t- is there no way to like tracing his call?
 34 HNDL: No it doesn't ↑work like that I'm afraid,
 35 (0.8)
 36 CALL: hhh- Er that's fine I mean I'm not at home at the minute
 37 so it will have to be (.) er: (.) okay I'll just have to sort
 38 it out myself that's all right don't worry.
 39 (0.6)
 40 CALL: Alright then I'll- I'll just [have] to-
 41 HNDL: [Well]
 42 (0.5)
 43 HNDL: °ah-°
 44 CALL: Sorry.
 45 (0.4)
 46 HNDL: What's your ↑surname.
[17 lines omitted - names and phone numbers provided]
 64 HNDL: Okay e- how long ago did he call you?
 65 (0.4)
 67 CALL: Literally er:::m >ten minutes ago<.
 68 (2.3)
 69 CALL: And he said he's being held?
 70 (0.7)
 71 CALL: He's being held he owes people money and >they're not
 72 letting him go until they pay him money which is fine
 73 .hhh I think he- he said he's gonna send me the bank
 74 details and I can send the money over but to be honest
 75 I don't want it t- like getting- keep getting involved
 76 in this shit.< But obviously when your brother's calling
 77 you ↑crying
 78 HNDL: I'm [gonna advise] to you sending any money over at this=
 79 CALL: [says (?that?)]
 80 HNDL: =moment okay?
 81 (0.4)
 82 CALL: Not to.
 83 (0.4)
 84 HNDL: Yeah no don't do noth- nothing at the moment.
 85 (0.7)
 86 CALL: Right.
 87 (0.6)
 88 HNDL: Let- let us deal with this. I'll t- I'll- I'll create an
 89 incident I'll send it ↑over and we'll get someone working on
 90 it immediately.

The call opens with the typical institutional identification, ‘*Anon* Police’ and the standard, ‘... what’s your emergency’ (line 1), designed to elicit the reason for the caller contacting 999 (Cromdal *et al.* 2012). The caller reports to have ‘just had phone call from my brother’, stating the brother doesn’t know where he is but that, ‘apparently he says he’s being held by people?’ (lines 4–5), setting out the relevance for reporting this to the police, even if a particular response has not yet been requested. In lines 4–5, the reported speech from the brother situates this as ‘second-hand’ knowledge (Whalen and Zimmerman 1990), distancing the caller’s own epistemic stance towards the information. The information is also problematised by the use of the evidential ‘apparently’, as well as the use of upward intonation at the end of ‘people?’, to perhaps frame the information with a sense of uncertainty.

After a short pause, the caller gives additional information that might begin to help place this in the category of ‘kidnap’, that the people are beating the brother up and want to be paid money (lines 6–8), but again this is delivered with a final upward intonation to perhaps suggest a questioning stance. Following this, the call-handler asks for confirmation that the brother’s location is unknown, ‘Alright and y- you don’t know where he is’, (line 10), in part to fulfil a standard procedural requirement for the incident log (a location must be entered before it can be progressed – Table 1). Very rapidly the caller replies with, ‘>Well no I’ve just literally got his telephone number ... <’ (line 12), indicating that they have little access to knowledge of the brother’s location and perhaps the incident more generally.

3.1.2 Extract 1 – uncertainty over action to be taken

After this, the caller goes on to describe their uncertainty about what action they themselves should take, rather than communicating high entitlement to assistance from the police, as might be found in other types of emergency calls at this point. This begins with a clear statement of uncertainty about action to be taken, ‘to be honest I don’t really know what to do’ (line 13). This is followed with an utterance that starts by stating a high obligation to do something, ‘I have to-’, but is self-corrected to ‘he’s wanting me to’, framing the payment of money as something the brother has requested (line 14), downgrading the sense of certainty about action to be taken. The caller suggests a sense of moral obligation to pay, ‘which is fine I don’t mind’ (lines 14–15), but counters with ‘but obviously I don’t know what’s going to happen ...’, now using an evidential adverb, ‘obviously’ to upgrade this counter problem.

Presenting this dilemma perhaps constitutes indirect advice-seeking by the caller, and indeed, this is a matter picked up later in the call. However, at this point in the call, we can see the uncertainty the caller expresses is not directly responded to by the call-handler, who simply proceeds with the institutional request for further details (line 18). Eventually this low entitlement, in addition to the caller’s expressed fears about a police visit to their workplace, leads to trouble in the call, particularly when the caller states, ‘Okay I’ll just have to sort it out myself that’s all right, don’t worry’ (lines 37–38), seemingly starting to shut down the call and any potential police intervention. The call-handler comes in in overlap (‘Well’ line 41) and rescues the interaction with further questions (line 46). The caller returns to their dilemma about what action they should take (lines 71–77) and the call-handler does now respond with advice, making clear that this *is* a policeable matter and that caller should not do anything, ‘I’m gonna advise to you sending any money over at this moment okay?’ (lines 78–80), followed by a clarification ‘Yeah no don’t do noth- nothing at the moment.’ (line 84) and ‘Let- let us deal with this’ (line 88).

The uncertain epistemic framing and the low entitlement from the caller at the outset of the call about this being a policeable matter, perhaps leads to some of these interactional difficulties but it also seems reasonable to suggest that this may create uncertainty for the call-handler in how they should institutionally categorise and respond to the incident. Although the call-handler categorises this as ‘concern for welfare’, an officer dealing with the incident later recategorises this on the basis of the information recorded (Incident log ‘PLEASE INFORM THE DUTY DI AS A POSSIBLE CRIME IN ACTION ...’) and the more serious protocols for the incident are enacted. This suggests that while enough information was present in the caller’s report to fulfil the ‘crime-in-action’ category, this

was not initially selected by the call-handler and it fell to an officer to later interpret the information and enact the protocols for kidnap. Building on Fele's (2023) observation that a lack of knowledge on the part of the caller increases the likelihood that a call will be shut down without the request being fulfilled, we see in our dataset, where there are complex criminal contexts and callers who may be hesitant about involving police, there may also be a risk of serious incident categories not being selected.

Extract 2

01 HNDL: *Anon* ↑Police what's your emergency,
 02 CALL: Er: (.) it's my son he's- um apparently being threatened.
 03 (0.8)
 04 HNDL: Okay and where is he now.
 05 (0.4)
 06 CALL: >We don't know.<
 07 (1.5)
 08 HNDL: Ok↑ay (.) so you don't know where he is at all?
 09 (0.4)
 10 CALL: No he: (.) u:m (.) >it's- it's been (.) a long history
 11 going on with it. I've had the police round today lookin-
 12 for him.
 13 He's threatening to kill himself (.) which he has done<
 14 (0.3)
 15 He's- um (.) my mum's: here (0.5) u:m (0.8)
 16 >No. He hasn't killed himself he's threatening to kill
 17 himself<
 18 My mum's here now. He's been sending her messages saying
 19 that hi- he's being held and people are gonna stab him.
 20 (1.6)
 21 HNDL: Okay so: (.) is he currently a missing ↑person is he,
 22 CALL: Er- well (.) I would say he's missing now yes.
 23 (1.6)
 24 HNDL: M- missing now. Er- w- was was the police are coming- came
 25 round earlier to look (.) [for him (.) I]
 26 CALL: [They came round] because
 27 somebody (.) um sent a distress call >because he's
 28 threatening to kill himself.<
 29 (1.0)
 30 HNDL: Right okay and what time was that.
 31 (0.4)
 32 CALL: Er- They came about what- er twelve o'clock?
 33 (1.1)
 34 CALL: today,
 35 (7.7) ((Audible typing))
 36 HNDL: There was a mess-age from (.) her son.
 37 (1.4)
 38 CALL: Er (.) messages to my mum's phone which is here now.
 39 HNDL: [Ri- okay]
 40 CALL: [Yeah.] (.) messages.
 41 (13.2) ((Audible typing))
 42 HNDL: So they say exactly (.) I'm gonna kill myself?
 43 (0.5)
 44 CALL: He- >he's threatening to k-< (.) he owed money to people
 45 (0.4) and he's been threatening to kill himself.
 46 Now he's saying that he's being held and that they're
 47 gonna stab him unless he pays them money.
 [9 lines omitted establishing names and spellings]
 58 HNDL: So how long's he been threatening to hurt himself?
 59 (0.8)
 60 CALL: Oh for months.
 61 (9.0) ((Audible typing))
 62 HNDL: So he's been threatening to make this suicide due to owing
 63 money to drug [dealers.]
 64 CALL: [yeah]

The caller's first presentation of the incident at line 2 is to state that it's about her son, 'he's-um apparently being threatened', with the epistemic marker 'apparently' again used, just as in Extract 1, to frame this as news as second-hand and not necessarily something the caller is certain of. As in the previous example, the call-handler follows this with a question about the son's location (line 4). At line 6, the caller hastily issues a '>we don't know<', clearly indicating that this knowledge is not available to her. The call-handler needs location information to populate the incident log, so a 'no knowledge claim' such as this hinders the 'progressivity' of the call (in CA terms, interactions have a preference for actions that further the *progress* of the activity at hand (Stivers and Robinson 2006)). Callers to emergency services must explain what they 'know', but in this case the speaker has limited access to knowing due to the circumstances of the incident (Pomerantz 1980). At this point, the call-handler tries to clarify the lack of knowledge about the location '...so you don't know where he is at all:?' (line 8), emphasising the final 'at all:' in a way which suggests a focus on the unknown location as the most pertinent aspect of the incident (pointing ahead to the framing as a potential 'missing persons' incident).

The caller goes on to give a more detailed, narrative account of the unfolding incident. At line 10 she issues a difficult, 'No he: (.) u:m (.) 'it's- it's been (.) a long history going on with it', as a means of starting her more extended explanation of why they have no knowledge of his location and perhaps implicitly questioning the reliability of the son's reported situation. Following the account about the police coming round 'today' because the son had threatened to kill himself, the caller finishes this turn by expanding on her initially stated reason for the call about her son, outlining reported information received via her mum that he's, '...saying that hi- he's being held and people are gonna stab him' (lines 18–19). As in Extract 1 then, this information is given as reported speech from her son, this time one step further removed by coming as messages via another person. The whole narrative (lines 10–17) provides several pieces of relevant information for the police call-handler in deciding how the incident should be responded to and potentially creates categorisation difficulties, since there is information relating to the son as (a) a missing person, (b) known to be at risk of harming himself, and (c) a final piece of information about potentially being held against his will (a possible 'kidnap'). The call-handler focusses on the first category (a) of missing persons: 'Okay so: (.) is he currently a missing ↑person is he'. For the caller, this is a categorisation she agrees but with an amendment that he is 'missing now yes', 'now' referring to this as true at this point in time, when he is reporting being held against his will. This in itself highlights the inherent ambiguity and sometimes overlap in incident categories, since a kidnap victim is by definition also likely to be 'missing' with an unknown location. The call-handler explores the categorisation further, with the question about whether the police were actually trying to establish his location in their earlier visit (lines 24–253), as might be expected for a missing persons incident. The caller comes in in overlap here, to correct that the police actually attended because of reason (b), the son's threatened suicide (i.e. not to establish his location): 'They came round because somebody (.) um sent a distress call>because he's threatening to kill himself.<' (line 26–28). At this point, the questions from the call-handler change tack; the time of the earlier police visit is established, followed by a query about the messages received, with a slightly mistaken, 'There was a mess-age from (.) her son' (line 36), which the caller clarifies as the reported, 'messages to my mum's phone' (line 38). The call-handler asks to confirm the content of the messages; 'So they say exactly (.) I'm gonna kill myself?' (line 42), emphasising the need to establish accuracy with the marker 'exactly' and switching from reported speech to quoted speech. Here the caller repeats the narrative she outlined earlier, from the threatened suicide to the son now being held against his will, again as reported speech: 'Now

he's saying that he's being held and that they're gonna stab him unless he pays them money' (lines 46–47). In this call then, the caller frames information in a way that may question the accuracy of the son's report, situating it within a longer history of involvement with the police and mental health difficulties.

3.1.4 Extract 2 – uncertainty over action to be taken

The call-handler picks up on some of these implications about reliability early on in the call, asking about criminal involvement shortly after the caller's account ('HNDL: So he's been threatening to commit suicide due to owing money to drug dealers?', lines 62–63), with the caller subsequently being hesitant to give names of the drug dealers 'over the phone'. As the interaction progresses (not provided in the extract above), the speakers focus more overtly on the likely truth of the son's claims, with the call-handler clearly asking, 'Do do you think he's telling the truth at the moment?' and various responses from the caller that bring this into question: 'I'm not too sure, because (sighs) to be honest he's- doesn't ever really tell the truth, so we don't really know what's going on'. During all this uncertain reporting, at no point does the caller specifically ask for police assistance. The call finishes with assurance from the call-handler that they are 'reviewing the incident' and that 'someone might call you back ... who's a bit more trained in this sort of thing'. The call-handler's application of the 'concern for welfare' category clearly raises this as 'policeable' matter but the 'kidnap' category and specific action to be taken are not established during the call itself. Instead, it is a dispatch-officer who first queries in the written incident log 'FIRST LINE IS READING AS A KIDNAPPING?' and recategorises the incident, based on the information that has been recorded.

The openings in Extracts 1 and 2 report separate incidents that involve the potential kidnap of a family member but display similar interactional patterns, with the accounts overtly marked for uncertainty. Both callers report the incident as information that they have been told, downgrading their epistemic stance through the evidential 'apparently' as well as through interactional resources to suggest uncertainty. What the callers know and do not know become negotiated throughout the calls. While both callers seemed to provide sufficient information for dispatch-officers to later interpret these as kidnap incidents from the logs, they were not initially categorised correctly by the call-handler, suggesting this framing in spoken interaction may have an impact on interpretation of the incident and cause difficulties, when dealing with uncertain and low entitlement third-party reports, in trying to distinguish one incident category from a range of possibilities that the information could be fitted to.

3.2. 'If you're not calm, I can't take any details': second-party callers difficulties in responding to questions

The two extracts now presented come from incidents that, unlike the previous two, were categorised by the call-handler as kidnaps from the outset. The first (Extract 3) was later recategorised as a sex offence, with the dispatch officer it is transferred to noting 'THIS IS NOT A KIDNAP' and instead an 'overt response' is agreed as necessary in the log, rather than the crime-in-action protocol. The second example (Extract 4) retained the categorisation of kidnap throughout (from which we can surmise the initial category was correct) and indeed the incident went to paper, with no incident log. With these extracts, in contrast to the previous examples, we can see callers design requests for police assistance with high entitlement, displaying urgency for their request to be granted, but produce minimal description of the incident during the interrogative-series.

We begin with an initial request for help by the daughter of a man who has been 'taken' in Extract 3, divided over two parts for the analysis.

Extract 3 – Part 1

01 HNDL: Hello, police emergen[cy.]
 02 CALL: [Uhm,] someone's come to my
 03 house and he's taken my dad somewhere >and I don't
 04 know where.< Seventeen Red Street.
 05 (0.4)
 06 HNDL: Okay. What's the postcode?
 07 (0.4)

[12 lines omitted establishing address]

20 HNDL: Okay.
 21 [(4.8)]
 22 HNDL: [((Audible typing))]
 23 CALL: [((heavy breathing))]
 24 HNDL: What- so, what's happened?
 25 (0.6)
 26 CALL: >I don't know.=I have no idea.< Someone's .hh (0.2)
 27 come to the house hh.
 28 (0.6)
 29 CALL: .hh
 30 (0.3)
 31 HNDL: Okay.
 32 (0.6)
 33 HNDL: Give me two seconds, I'm just [creating a] job.
 34 CALL: [DAD!]
 35 (0.2)
 36 CALL: Da:d.
 37 (0.8)
 38 CALL: Is that Dad? >I don't know.<
 39 (0.3)
 40 CALL: Someone's just driven pa:st. ~Where's-- .hih I don't
 41 know ~where he--
 42 (0.5)
 43 CALL: I don't know where they w(h)ent.
 44 HNDL: Okay.
 45 (1.1)
 46 CALL: Please can you just ↑come ↑here,
 47 (0.5)
 48 HNDL: Yeah. No. I'm putting a job on as we speak.
 49 [(3.1)]
 50 HNDL: [((Audible typing))]
 51 CALL: ~↑↑Uhm ↑I ↑don't know what's happening.~ hhh. .hhh
 52 hhh. No mum, I've got them.
 53 [(6.6)]
 54 CALL: [((sobbing))]
 55 HNDL: [((Audible typing))]
 56 CALL: HiHH. Huhhh. .hh hh. .hhh hhhhh. I don't know.
 57 (0.7)
 58 HNDL: Okay. So j- I need you to just calm down for me.
 59 (0.5)

3.2.1 *The initial request*

In overlap with that call-handler's initial identification 'Police emergency', conveying urgency, the caller produces a minimal description of the incident, 'someone's come to my house and taken my Dad somewhere and I don't know where' (lines 2-4), making available the 'emergency' as one where another party has been taken, relevant for categorisation of kidnap. This relevance seems to be reflected in the call-handler's incident log, where the call-handler notes, with similar phrasing, that 'SOMEONE HAS JUST COME TO HER HOUSE AND TAKEN HER DAD' and the incident is quickly transferred to dispatch as a 'kidnap' with an urgent 'priority 1' code. Unlike the first two extracts, here the caller provides the first line of the address as part of this request (line 4). While the request for assistance does not include high entitlement formulations such as 'I need the police' (Curl and Drew 2008, Drew and Walker 2010), providing the address in this sequential position demonstrates an expectation by the caller that the request will be fulfilled and police assistance sent.

3.2.2 *Issues with eliciting necessary information*

The call-handler's first substantive question elicits further specifics of the address (line 6), suggesting the request for assistance will likely be granted (Kent and Antaki 2019). This perhaps confirms that the caller's request was sufficiently 'policeable'. At line 24, the call-handler then initiates the interrogative-series to gain more information about the incident; 'What- so, what's happened?'. The knowledge exchange that takes place here is crucial for the call-handler categorising the incident and issuing the appropriate response protocol. At lines 26-27 the caller provides a truncated version of what they reported in the initial request, prefaced by 'I don't know. I have no idea', another 'no knowledge' claim like those seen in the previous section, produced with audible in and out breaths indicating crying. In addition to the 'no knowledge' claim hindering progressivity, crying, while it conveys distress and further implies urgency, can impact on a speaker's ability to produce turns at talk (Hepburn 2004). Stalls to progressivity of the call mean a delay in the ability of parties to move through the various actions and phases required to reach an understanding about the incident occurring.

3.2.3 *Responding without the 'full picture'*

At this stage (lines 29-31), the call-handler has not confirmed that a response will be sent. However, at line 33, the call-handler accounts for the delay in their talk ('give me two seconds'), as they are 'creating a job'; which may or may not be understood by the lay caller as initiating police-assistance, although the caller's subsequent request that police attend, 'Please can you just come here' (line 46), suggests it was not understood in this way. During this, the caller calls out in the background 'DAD!' (line 34) and 'Is that Dad?' (line 38), emphasising that this is an immediately unfolding incident in a way that Extracts 1 and 2 did not perform. The call-handler repeats, 'I'm putting a job on as we speak' (line 48). At lines 51 and 56, we see the caller displaying confusion, possibly talking to someone in the background, and becoming increasingly upset. Similarly to police interviews, where officers deal with the distress of interviewees by encouraging the progressivity of the interaction (by saying things like, 'take your time', see Antaki *et al.* 2015), we see the call-handler at line 58 issuing a directive as a repair following the false start 'So j-', to 'I need you to just calm down for me', indicating difficulty with progressing the call. In part 2 of this extract, we move from the initial request into the interrogative-series.

Extract 3 – Part 2

60 HNDL: So what- what exactly has happened? T- [as-]
61 CALL: [Uh] we're
62 at the bottom of the road and there's- and they say
63 they're delivery drivers. But them people have taken
64 him.
65 (0.4)
66 HNDL: Okay. So did they-
67 CALL: Car's [got here.]
68 HNDL: [Did w's your-]
69 (0.2)
70 HNDL: Was your [dad indoors?]
71 CALL: [Who are you:?]
72 [(2.3)]
73 [((background voices)]
74 HNDL: Have- [have they gone off in-]
75 CALL: [(This is)the police.]
76 HNDL: Have they gone off in a vehicle?
77 CALL: Hhh. .hhh I don't (ca') .hh hh. [~Can you please=
78 HNDL: [Hello.]
79 CALL: =come here they've got [my-]
80 HNDL: [Yeah.]
81 (0.5)
82 HNDL: Yeah. Hello. Lis[ten, listen.]
83 CALL: [()]
84 (0.3)
85 CALL: [Please,]
86 HNDL: [Listen.]
87 (0.3)
88 HNDL: There are off[ic-]ers,
89 CALL: [.hh hih.]
90 HNDL: [Listen, I'm tryi-]
91 CALL: [~.HIhihih~]
92 (0.5)
93 HNDL: Hello. >Right.< Listen. [Calm down.]
94 CALL: [Someone's-]
95 (0.5)
96 HNDL: Listen! I NEED you t- I need you to be calm,
97 (0.4)
98 CALL: Yes, [yes.]
99 HNDL: [beca]use if y- if you're not calm, I can't
100 take any de[tails when you're not,]
101 CALL: [Yes, I'm here.]
102 HNDL: An' I can't [get you the help you need.]
103 CALL: [I'm here. Yes.] Sorry.

The call-handler initiates the interrogative-series with, 'So what- what exactly has happened?' (line 60). The caller expands on her initial report with a description of what has taken place, this time including that the people who have taken her Dad were 'delivery drivers' (lines 61-64). Between lines 66-77 the call-handler attempts to ask further questions to clarify the incident, yet

the caller is not attending to the questions, and is instead heard talking to other parties in the background. There is overlapping talk, emphasising the unfolding nature of the incident for this caller but again causing issues with progressivity and delaying the call-handler from gaining information required for categorising the incident.

3.2.4 *Communicating the issues with minimal information provision*

For the caller, these incidents are likely unusual and highly distressing. We see in part 2, the caller is issuing requests for a police response from line 77, while the call-handler attempts to get their attention (78–86) using ‘hello’ and ‘listen’ to try and engage in dialogue. As the call goes on, at line 88, the call-handler attempts to reorient the caller to the task and deliver the information that ‘there are officers’, presumably ‘on the way’, but the turn is abandoned, with the caller distressed, audibly crying and talking in overlap, making it hard for the call-handler to finish. At line 96 the call-handler displays frustration through an repeat of ‘Listen!’ as an admonishment followed by, ‘I need you to x, so I can do y’, in this case, to be ‘calm’ to get the information required, to which the caller aligns (lines 101 and 103) and the central business of the interrogative-series resumes.

In the next call (Extract 4, split over three parts), we see a distressed caller requesting help this time without *any* description of what has taken place in their initial request. This call was initially categorised as a kidnap and closed as a kidnap.

Extract 4 – Part 1

01 HNDL: Emergency.
 02 (0.8)
 03 CALL: Please quick! Twenty two Sycamore Way.
 04 (0.4)
 05 CALL: Please [quick, hurry up-]
 06 HNDL: [What’s the post]code? What’s the postcode.
 [4 lines omitted – address and location given]
 11 HNDL: Okay.= [What’s going] on,
 12 CALL: [()]
 13 CALL: I can't talk.=Please get the police here
 14 now.=Please. Huhh. .Hiuh They’ve took my husband
 15 outside with a kni:fe.
 16 (0.4)
 17 CALL: Pl: [ease.]
 18 HNDL: [Okay.]
 19 (0.4)
 20 CALL: Hhh.
 21 HNDL: Okay.
 22 CALL: ~Pl (h) ease.~ Hhhihuh.
 23 (0.3)

3.2.5 *The initial request*

After the institutional identification from the call-handler, here, unlike in Extract 3, the caller initially provides no description of the incident, only ‘please quick’ (line 3) and the first line of the address, followed by ‘please quick, hurry up’ (line 5). Like Extract 3, this request displays high entitlement to assistance, with the turns designed to communicate urgency and put the onus on the call-handler to issue a response (Larsen 2013). While this request, without description, is not sufficient to initiate police assistance, we see at line 6 the call-handler requests the postcode in overlap with the caller’s pleading, which as outlined, tends to imply the request will be granted (Kent and Antaki 2019).

3.2.6 *Issues with eliciting necessary information*

After this short opening request, at line 11 the call-handler initiates the interrogative-series by asking ‘What’s going on’, to determine the policeable nature of the incident and what assistance should be

sent. At line 13, the caller resists the question, with 'I can't talk' and reissues the request for the police to attend (lines 13–14). The caller then expands this turn, after audible crying, and produces a brief description of the policeable matter which aligns with the category of a kidnap. The generic reference term 'they' (Tracy and Anderston 1999) implies a group of people have 'took' the caller's husband and with a weapon, 'a knife' (lines 14–15). Between lines 16–23 the caller pleads again for police assistance, while audibly upset, acknowledged by the call-handler with 'okay' at 18 and 21. We rejoin the extract with the call-handler's question, 'Who are th[ese] peo↓ple' (line 24).

Extract 4 – Part 2

24 HNDL: Who are th[ese] peo↓ple.
 25 CALL: [Ple-]
 26 (0.6)
 27 CALL: ~I don't know.=They're someone to do with my son and
 28 he don't even live here anymore::~~
 29 (0.5)
 30 HNDL: #0-:# okay.
 31 (0.3)
 32 HNDL: Where is your husband at the ↑mo↑ment.
 33 (0.4)
 34 CALL: >↑They've ↑pulled him outside< and they've got bats
 35 [and knives.]
 36 HNDL: [How many]people,
 37 (0.7)
 38 CALL: ~↑Fo:ur~
 39 (0.3)
 40 CALL: Plea[se,]
 41 HNDL: [Four] ma[les?]
 42 CALL: [(Please)]
 43 (0.8)
 44 CALL: Four males.
 45 (0.5)
 46 CALL: Quick!
 47 (0.3)
 48 CALL: Pl[e::ase.]
 49 HNDL: [Oka:y.]
 50 (1.2)
 51 HNDL: With a knife and what else have they got.=and bats?
 52 (0.5)
 53 CALL: Bats.
 54 (0.7)
 55 HNDL: Okay. Can [you describe] the ↑kni:fe?
 56 CALL: [~Hih. Huhuh.~]
 57 (0.5)
 58 CALL: Hhh. ~~P(h)le(h)a:se.~~

This question at line 24 requests expansion on the 'they' the caller referred to. The caller answers initially with 'I don't know', displaying, similarly to previous extracts, limited access to the details of the incident, before adding the knowledge she *does* have, 'They're someone to do with my son and he don't even live here anymore::~~' (lines 27–28). The second question from the call-handler (line 32) elicits further information about the location of the caller's husband and the weapons that the

kidnappers have, 'bats and knives' (lines 34–35). At 36, the enquiry about 'how many people' is answered by the caller, 'four' (line 38), and confirms again line 44, but with increasing hearable emotion (~ indicates 'wobbly voice'), beginning to plead 'please' and 'quick!' (lines 40, 42, 46 and 48), often overlap with the call-handler. By line 55, the call-handler asks for a description of the knife, with the formulation 'Can you X?', attending to the caller's diminishing ability to engage in the interrogative-series (Deppermann and Gubina 2021, pp.186–187). Here, the interaction breaks down, with the caller crying in overlap and then producing a further 'please' with crying particles and a wobbly voice (line 58). At this point, progressivity is threatened and in the next part of this extract, we see for the first time the call-handler confirming that police assistance will be granted.

3.2.7 Responding without the 'full-picture'

Extract 4 – Part 3

59 HNDL: °°Oka:y, °° if y[ou can't speak to me that's fine,
 60 CALL: [~Please get the~]
 61 HNDL: just keep your (land) line.=I'm gonna get you an
 62 issue >on an emergency response<, o[ka: y.]
 63 CALL: [.Hih huhhuh.]
 64 (0.2)
 65 CALL: Please! Quick! Hurry up. ~Ple(h)ase.~
 66 (1.1)
 67 HNDL: °°Oka:y. °°
 68 (0.5)
 69 HNDL: What's your s- what's your husband called?
 70 CALL: Huh. .Hhh ~Eddy Smith.~
 71 HNDL: Eddy Smith?
 72 CALL: ~~Yea::h.~~ <Plea[(hihi)se.>]
 73 HNDL: [O:kay.]
 74 (0.4)
 75 CALL: ~Huh.~
 76 (0.2)
 77 HNDL: Oka:y. Listen to ↑me. I'm gonna get officers to you
 78 on an emergency response.=They're gonna come as
 79 quickly as they can.=What's your na:me? What's
 80 [your name.]
 81 CALL: [Jenny.]
 82 (0.2)
 83 HNDL: [Jenny.]
 84 CALL: [Jenny.] Please, quick, they're gonna burst my doors
 85 down.
 86 (0.2)
 87 CALL: ~~#Ple[ase.#~~]
 88 HNDL: [A'right.] Okay Jenny. Can you des[cri]be=
 89 CALL: [huh.]
 90 HNDL: =them for me?
 91 CALL: .hh ~No::. I can't, >not at the moment<.~
 92 HNDL: [Okay.]
 93 CALL: [I need to] ring my kids. I've gotta get off the
 94 phone, please.

In this final part, we see the call-handler acknowledge the breakdown in progressivity of the call, 'if y[ou can't speak to me that's fine', issue a directive to stay on the line and then describe a future action, 'I'm gonna get you an issue > on an emergency response<', meaning the call has been given a priority (lines 59-62). In overlap (line 60), with crying (line 63) the caller does not appear to understand this and at 65 continues requests for an urgent response. At line 69, the call-handler attempts to elicit further information from the caller about her husband's name, and although responding, the caller is becoming increasingly upset.

In the two calls presented in Extracts 3 and 4, it is not necessarily that the caller lacks access to the information requested, as was the case for Extracts 1 and 2, and in fact these second-party callers are much closer to the unfolding incident to be able to access this information. However, the high entitlement, audible distress and proximity to the ongoing incident places them in multiple 'participation frameworks', making it difficult for the questions to proceed. It is interesting that, for reports like this where callers expressed higher entitlement, a larger proportion should have initially been classified as 'kidnap' from the outset, raising the question of whether this type of request by the caller increases the willingness of the call-handler to apply this category. The immediacy of the situations presented, where second-party callers report witnessing a family member being taken and in front of them, is also in stark contrast to Extracts 1 and 2, where messages had been received without a high degree of certainty expressed that the potential victims were genuinely in the situations they reported. The proximal, unfolding situations in Extracts 3 and 4, however unclear they may be, are ones that the call-handler can be fairly certain represent an immediate threat to someone's safety and may consequently be more willing to raise the serious categorisation of 'kidnap'. While we cannot derive statistically significant findings from this small number of calls, what is clear is that the call-handler is faced with a different set of communicative challenges in Extracts 3 and 4, which both the call-handlers in these examples successfully navigate to gain information.

4. Discussion and conclusions

A number of findings from our analysis have value in understanding how we can profile the communication in emergency calls potentially reporting 'kidnap'.

4.1. Epistemic stance of second- and third-party callers

The call-handler must often deal with difficulties in the caller's stated access to knowledge during these interactions, with frequent claims of 'no knowledge' (e.g. 'we don't know', 'I have no idea') and statements that distance the caller from committing to the truth of the reported incident (e.g. 'he says ...', 'apparently'). This difficulty is perhaps indicative of this type of crime, which by its nature is most often reported by second- or third-parties who position themselves with some degree of distance. Early CA research on emergency calls showed how reports from callers with a greater distance from an incident required a 'practical epistemology' to be performed to show how they came to know about it (Whalen and Zimmerman 1990). However, the callers here, in Extracts 1 and 2 in particular, express clear difficulty with the accessing a fuller account of the situation or hesitancy about doing so where it involves criminality. Lack of knowledge when making a request is not uncommon in emergency calls but it can present a real difficulty since, as indicated, it increases the likelihood that police assistance is not granted (Fele 2023, p. 98). Studies of 'exceptional' cases have shown how misaligned expectations and an apparent lack of knowledge in relation to the incident can lead to the basis of the request being unclear and ultimately to tragic errors in responding (e.g. Whalen *et al.* 1988). In the calls reporting kidnap in this study (an infrequent and atypical type of call for call-handlers to be confronted with) it is certainly possible to see that the lack of access to knowledge by the caller and hesitancy

can impede progress during the call-handler's questions, impacting on how easy it is to correctly categorise and respond to the incident.

4.2. Presenting with differing entitlement

We also observed differences in whether callers claimed low or high entitlement to a police response. CA research has shown how framing requests with high entitlement makes it harder for the recipient to refuse (Craven and Potter 2010, Kent 2012), with their occurrence in emergency calls making it more likely that the call-handler will move to 'dispatch-relevant' questions (Larsen 2013). In Extracts 1 and 2, callers displayed a low level of entitlement about what, if any, police action should be expected. While we saw these callers were able, to some degree, to interactionally comply with the institutional tasks required in terms of engaging with the call-handler's questions, they did so in a way which did not communicate a sense of urgency or clear desire for a police response. The fact that both of these calls were categorised as a 'concern for welfare' but were later re-categorised by officers as 'kidnap' incidents, might suggest these uncertain framings and low entitlement increase the difficulty for the call-handler in confidently categorising as serious, high-priority 'kidnap' incidents that will involve senior officers. While hard to claim definitively, this is also corroborated by ethnographic research which finds call-handlers may be hesitant in selecting categories that involve the implementation of a serious 'crime-in-action' protocol (Traynor 2022). Call-handlers in Traynor's research stated that they coded some incidents with a broad-ranging category as a 'catch all' precautionary grading, such as 'concern for welfare' (in our corpus we have 8 initially coded as concern for welfare, later categorised as kidnap) or 'disturbance' (we have 4 of this category, later categorised as kidnap).

Extracts 3 and 4, on the other hand, displayed a high entitlement to a response, but could be problematic for call-handlers in progressing through the necessary questions to categorise the incident and deploy a response. Our analysis of the requests and the initial questions particularly showed how extreme distress could interfere with the required interrogative-series (a phenomenon also identified in Whalen and Zimmerman 1998, Schuler 2001, Paoletti 2012, Fele 2014, Stokoe and Richardson 2023). Traynor (2022) also found that instances of extreme emotions, such as crying and screaming, caused incident coding problems for call-handlers, as dispatchers were reluctant to deploy scarce police resources to ambiguous emotional requests alone. In the examples above, the call-handler's move to indicate that an 'emergency response' code had already been issued, something which sequentially is usually done towards the end of an emergency call, was one means of mitigating these difficulties in caller interactions, smoothing over concern from the caller that the urgency is addressed earlier on in the call. It is notable that the more immediate unfolding situations in Extracts 3 and 4 were initially coded as serious 'kidnap' incidents (unlike the previous examples), and an urgent response requested, seeming to fit with previous research on emergency calls that found callers encoding a greater level of 'entitlement' predicts greater willingness by call-handlers to move towards prioritising dispatch. However, notably there were also a greater number of mistaken 'kidnap' codings for this call type, suggesting the urgency combined with a lack of information may make the initial categorisation less accurate.

4.3. Enhancing the understanding of categorisation in specific types of emergency call

Taken together, the analysis of these calls has practical implications for call-handler training, providing a communicative profile of how kidnap reports are made that may help to enable more confident categorisations of 'uncertain' reporting, as well as communicative strategies that help to progress calls where the caller is distressed. CA is being increasingly applied to practice in this way, with interactional evidence able to address some of the gaps between training and real-life practice (e.g. Stokoe 2014, Sikveland *et al.* 2022). Our analytic approach demonstrates the value of focussing on particular types of crime reporting, where specific interactional patterns can be identified to help

understand incident-types. While much of the early research on spoken interaction in emergency calls focussed on patterns across calls, our work moves towards looking at how particular types of crime reporting might present specific interactional challenges (see also Stokoe and Richardson (2023) on calls reporting domestic violence).

Relatedly, the study highlights processes that take place, at a micro-interactional level, when categories of crime incidents are decided. Far from being the straightforward application of policies and specific criteria, categorisation work can be an interactionally negotiated process between caller and call-handler, with different categories sometimes openly discussed (e.g. 'missing person'). While the advice from the NCA is for callers to explicitly state the category of 'kidnap', in the calls examined here, although potential categories may be discussed, these are often uncertain and the category of 'kidnap' rarely raised explicitly. Uncertainty over the incident potentially makes a recognisable category harder to distinguish and works to downgrade risk and the likelihood of selecting the 'kidnap' label, even though we later see information in the incident log leading to recategorisation by officers interpreting the information. Identifying crime categories clearly matters at a local level, for informing the police response, but also at an institutional level, for determining trends in incidents and policing strategies. However, there is often only a tacit understanding of how categories are initially formed and decided when encountering initial reports from the public, making their first point of contact with the police. Observing the negotiation and uncertainty over categories during initial reporting of a difficult crime type demonstrates the complexity of these category structures at a critical juncture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was funded through a seed corn grant awarded by the Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics, supported by the Research England 'Expanding Excellence in England (E3)' fund.

ORCID

Sarah Atkins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3481-5681>

Emma Richardson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0399-2343>

Joanne Traynor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8530-4163>

Felicity Deamer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6466-9211>

References

- Antaki, C., et al., 2015. Dealing with the distress of people with intellectual disabilities reporting sexual assault and rape. *Discourse studies*, 17 (4), 415–432. doi:10.1177/1461445615578962
- Antunes, G., and Scott, E.J., 1981. Calling the Cops: police telephone operators and citizen calls for service. *Journal of criminal justice*, 9 (2), 165–180. doi:10.1016/0047-2352(81)90020-9
- Bergmann, J.R., 1992. Veiled morality: notes on discretion in psychiatry. In: P. Drew and J. Heritage, eds. *Talk at work: interaction in institutional settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 23–46.
- Bolaños-Carpio, A., 2020. When emergencies are not urgent: requesting help in calls to 911 Costa Rica. In: C. Taleghani-Nikazm, E. Betz, and P. Golato, eds. *Mobilizing others: grammar and Lexis within larger activities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 229–252.
- Craven, A., and Potter, J., 2010. Directives: entitlement and contingency in action. *Discourse studies*, 12 (4), 419–442. doi:10.1177/1461445610370126
- Cromdal, J., et al., 2012. Finding out what's happened: two procedures for opening emergency calls. *Discourse studies*, 14 (4), 371–397. doi:10.1177/1461445612439960
- Curl, T.S., and Drew, P., 2008. Contingency and action: a comparison of two forms of requesting. *Research on language & social interaction*, 41 (2), 129–153. doi:10.1080/08351810802028613

- Deppermann, A., and Gubina, A., 2021. Positionally-sensitive action-ascription: uses of Kannst du X? 'Can you X?' in their sequential and multimodal context. *Interactional linguistics*, 1 (2), 183–215. doi:10.1075/il.21005.dep
- Drew, P. and Walker, T., 2010. Citizens' emergency calls requesting assistance in calls to the police. In: M. Coulthard, A. May, and R. Sousa-Silva, eds. *The Routledge handbook of forensic linguistics*. London: Routledge, 123–138.
- Fele, G., 2014. Requesting help with null or limited knowledge: entitlements and responsibility in emergency calls. In: A. Zuczkowski, R. Bongelli, I. Riccioni, and C. Canestrari, eds. *Communicating certainty and uncertainty in medical, supportive and scientific contexts*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 139–156.
- Fele, G., 2023. *Emergency communication: the organization of calls to emergency dispatch centers*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garcia, A.C., and Parmer, P.A., 1999. Misplaced mistrust: the collaborative construction of doubt in 911 emergency calls. *Symbolic interaction*, 22 (4), 297–324. doi:10.1525/si.1999.22.4.297
- Gormely, P., 2020. *A call for help: police contact management through call handling and control rooms in 2018/2019 HMICFRS*. London: The London Stationary Office.
- Hepburn, A., 2004. Crying: notes on description, transcription, and interaction. *Research on language & social interaction*, 37 (3), 251–290. doi:10.1207/s15327973rlsi3703_1
- Heritage, J., and Clayman, S.E., 2010. *Talk in action: interactions, identities and institutions*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Heritage, J., and Raymond, G., 2005. The terms of agreement: indexing epistemic authority and subordination in talk-in-interaction. *Social psychology quarterly*, 68 (1), 15–38. doi:10.1177/019027250506800103
- Jefferson, G., 2004. Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In: G. Lerner, ed. *Conversation analysis: studies from the first generation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 13–31.
- Kent, A., 2012. Compliance, resistance and incipient compliance when responding to directives. *Discourse studies*, 14 (6), 711–730. doi:10.1177/1461445612457485
- Kent, A., and Antaki, C., 2019. Police call-takers' first substantive question projects the outcome of the call. *Applied linguistics*, 41 (5), 640–661. doi:10.1093/applin/amz002
- Kevoe-Feldman, H., 2019. Inside the Emergency Service Call-Center: reviewing thirty years of language and social interaction research. *Research on language and social interaction*, 52 (3), 227–240. doi:10.1080/08351813.2019.1631038
- Larsen, T., 2013. Dispatching emergency assistance: callers' claims of entitlement and call takers' decisions. *Research on language & social interaction*, 46, 205–230. doi:10.1080/08351813.2013.810401
- Law Commission, The. 2011. Simplification of criminal law: kidnapping. Consultation Paper No. 200. London.
- Leeney, D.G., and Mueller-Johnson, K., 2010. Examining the link between the Forensic Quality and Customer Service Quality of police call centre interviews. *International journal of police science & management, [e-journal]*, 12 (1), 69–80.
- Lipsky, M., 1980. *Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Crane Russak.
- Lumsden, K., and Black, A., 2018. Austerity policing, emotional labour and the boundaries of police work: an ethnography of a police force control room in England. *The british journal of criminology, [online]*, 58 (3), 606–623. doi:10.1093/bjc/azx045
- Manning, P.K., 1982. Producing drama: symbolic communication and the police. *Symbolic interaction, [online]*, 5 (2), 223–242. doi:10.1525/si.1982.5.2.223
- Mushin, I., 2001. *Evidentiality and epistemological stance: narrative retelling*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- NCA, National Crime Agency. n.d. Kidnap and extortion. Available from: <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/kidnap-and-extortion> [Accessed 15 May 2023].
- NPIA, National Policing Improvement Agency, 2011. *The national standard for incident recording*. London: Home Office. Available from: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a3156ed915d6d99f5dd2e/count-nsir11.pdf> [Accessed 10 Nov 2023].
- Paoletti, I., 2012. Operators managing callers' sense of urgency in calls to the medical emergency number. *Pragmatics*, 22 (4), 671–695.
- Pomerantz, A., 1980. Telling my side: 'Limited access' as a 'fishing' device. *Sociological inquiry*, 50 (3-4), 186–198. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682X.1980.tb00020.x
- Raymond, C., 2014. Negotiating entitlement to language: calling 911 without English. *Language in society*, 43 (1), 33–59. doi:10.1017/S0047404513000869
- Sacks, H., 1992. *Lectures on conversation (Vols 1 & 2)*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schuler, S., 2001. Talking community at 911: the centrality of communication in coping with emotional labour. In: G. J. Sheperd and E. W. Rothenbuhler, eds. *Communication and community*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 53–77.
- Sidnell, J. and Stivers, T., Eds. 2012. *The Handbook of conversation analysis*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sikveland, R.O., Kevoe-Feldman, H., and Stokoe, E., 2022. *Crisis talk: negotiating with individuals in crisis*. London: Routledge.
- Stivers, T., and Robinson, J.D., 2006. A preference for progressivity in interaction. *Language in society*, 35 (3), 367–392. doi:10.1017/S0047404506060179
- Stokoe, E., 2014. The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM): a method for training communication skills as an alternative to simulated role-play. *Research on language and social interaction*, 47 (3), 255–265. doi:10.1080/08351813.2014.925663

- Stokoe, E., and Richardson, E., 2023. Asking for help without asking for help: how victims request and police offer assistance in cases of domestic violence when perpetrators are potentially co-present. *Discourse studies*, 25 (3), 383–408. doi:10.1177/14614456231157293
- Tennent, E., 2021. Identity and action: help-seeking requests in calls to a victim support service. *British journal of social psychology*, 60 (4), 1241–1261. doi:10.1111/bjso.12448
- Tracy, K., 1997. Interactional trouble in emergency service requests: a problem of frames. *Research on language and social interaction*, 30, 315–343. doi:10.1207/s15327973rlsi3004_3
- Tracy, K., and Anderson, D.L., 1999. Relational positioning strategies in police calls: a dilemma. *Discourse studies*, 1 (2), 201–225. doi:10.1177/1461445699001002004
- Traynor, J. 2022. The voices of communications officers: an ethnography of a police control room. PhD. Anglia Ruskin University. Available from: <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.875787>.
- Whalen, M.R., and Zimmerman, D.H., 1987. Sequential and institutional contexts in calls for help. *Social Psychology quarterly*, 50 (2), 172–185. doi:10.2307/2786750
- Whalen, M.R., and Zimmerman, D.H., 1990. Describing trouble: practical epistemology in citizen calls to the police. *Language in society*, 19 (4), 465–492. doi:10.1017/S0047404500014779.
- Whalen, J., and Zimmerman, D.H., 1998. Observations on the display and management of emotion in naturally occurring activities: the case of “hysteria” in calls to 9-1-1. *Social psychology quarterly*, 61, 141–159. doi:10.2307/2787066
- Whalen, J., Zimmerman, D.H., and Whalen, M.R., 1988. When words fail: a single case analysis. *Social problems*, 35 (4), 335–362. doi:10.2307/800591
- Zimmerman, D.H., 1984. Talk and its occasion: the case of calling the police. In: D Schiffrin, ed. *Meaning, form and use in context: linguistic applications*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 201–208.
- Zimmerman, D.H., 1992. The interactional organisation of calls for emergency assistance. In: P. Drew and J. Heritage, eds. *Talk at work: interaction in institutional settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 418–469.