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Problem formulation in mental health residential treatment A single case analysis

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Abstract

This paper investigates an episode of interaction in a mental health residential centre in Italy, where a resident and a staff member manage a relational problem. The episode leads to an apparently paradoxical outcome: in spite of the fact that the resident has sought the staff members' cooperation to make sense of the relational problem, she ends up being blamed for that problem. Adopting the approach of conversation analysis, the paper shows that this outcome is the result of the transition from a relational view, to a one-sided view of the problem. The practices employed to accomplish this transition reflect a set of contrasting concerns and goals, which the participants bring to bear on the interaction. Reflection about these aspects can sensitize the public to some of the intricacies and challenges entailed in the delivery of mental health residential treatment.

Questo articolo esplora un episodio di interazione avvenuto in una comunità psichiatrica, in cui una ospite e un membro dello staff gestiscono un problema relazionale. L'episodio conduce a un esito apparentemente paradossale: malgrado l'ospite abbia cercato la collaborazione dello staff per comprendere la natura del problema, alla fine viene incolpata per aver generato il problema stesso. Adottando l'approccio dell'analisi della conversazione, l'articolo mostra come questo esito sia il prodotto della transizione da una visione relazionale ad una visione unilaterale del problema. Le pratiche impiegate per compiere questa transizione riflettono un insieme di preoccupazioni e di obiettivi contrastanti, manifestati dai partecipanti nel corso dell'interazione. La riflessione su questi aspetti può sensibilizzare il pubblico alle difficoltà e ai dilemmi implicati nel trattamento psichiatrico residenziale.

Key words: Problem formulation, mental health, residential treatment, educator, conversation analysis, single case analysis.

Parole chiave: Formulazione di problemi, salute mentale, comunità terapeutica, educatore professionale, analisi della conversazione, analisi di caso singolo.

1. Problem formulation in conversational interaction

In 1988, Drew and Holt commented on a classic article by Emerson and Messinger (1977), in order to contextualize their study of complaints in the broader debate on the social construction of problems (Drew & Holt, 1988; see also Schegloff, 2005). In this section, we briefly go back to Emerson and Messinger's (1977) article and use some of its key points as theoretical coordinates for our enquiry.

First, among other problem types, relational problems bear special features and challenges: addressing them “raises issues of rights and responsibilities in that relationship” (Emerson & Messinger, 1977, p. 123), such as who is accountable for having originated the problem and who should be responsible for solving it.

A second and related point concerns verbal expression as the vehicle that “publicizes, explicates, and radically changes a purely individual trouble” (p. 125). In service encounters, talk-in-interaction is the clients' main resource to bring their concerns to professional attention, to mobilize assistance and to have assistance tailored to their own needs. Entering this process, though, inevitably entails problem (re)shaping: professionals “often operate with a distinctive theory of trouble and interventional ideologies which require symmetrical or asymmetrical responses” (p. 129), and will put such theories to use, in order to translate the clients' ‘troubles’ into ‘problems’ that they can solve (Jefferson & Lee, 1981/1992). This translation-process is likely to entail categorization devices (Schegloff, 2005), via which clients' troubles may be treated as local instances of a discrete number of problem-types. Emerson and Messinger (1977) discuss two devices that professionals can use to interpret and to deal with clients' relational problems. In “relational interventions”, professionals interpret clients' relational problems as conflicts, where all the parties involved are held responsible and are equally engaged in problem-resolution. Instead, in “one-sided interventions” professionals side with one of the parties and against the other. Such interventions draw on a view that locates the problem-source in the misdeeds or the disfunctioning of only one party. The difference between these two problem/remedy types “derives less from the troubles themselves than from the perspective or framework from which they come to be viewed or treated” (p. 124).

In this study, these issues – namely, how relational problems are shaped in talk-in-interaction and what interpretive resources are used to make sense of them – are explored with reference to an interactional episode recorded in a mental health residential centre.

2. "Problems" in mental health residential treatment

The enquiry reported here is part of a study carried out in a mental health residential centre. In this service, staff members (nurses, educators, and care workers) support residents to (re)gain competencies that may have been compromised by mental health difficulties and by processes of social exclusion (for an overview see Crescentini, De Felice, & Tonzar, 2004). At the centre, staff members and residents are ordinarily involved in mundane activities such as cooking, cleaning, reading newspapers, going out for a walk, and so on. Relational problems can emerge in the course of these activities and a significant part of the educational work carried out by the staff members involves engaging the residents in solving these problems.

Our paper focuses on an episode where a relational problem is brought to the staff members' attention and handled as an object in conversational interaction. We propose this episode as a critical incident (Mortari, 2009), which can sensitize about some of the intricacies entailed in carrying out mental health residential treatment. For this purpose, we analyse what strikes us as a particularly puzzling case, where a resident is identified as the only party responsible for generating a relational problem. By using the approach of conversation analysis, we demonstrate how this outcome can be seen as the methodic achievement of practices of problem formulation, which reflect the participants' contrasting goals and interests in the interaction.

3. Data and method

The episode analysed here comes from the audio-recording of a multi-person meeting held at the mental health residential centre. 2 caregivers, Massimo¹ (a nurse), Barbara (a trained educator), and 9 residents attended the meeting.

The analysis is carried out using the approach of conversation analysis (CA) (Fele, 2007; Ten Have, 2007). CA is an approach for the study of "practices through which members of a culture conduct and understand social interaction" (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005, p. 149); it is well suited for the analysis of how activities are accomplished and understood by participants in the course of naturally occurring interactions. The analytic work entails identifying the actions carried by turns-at-talk, by drawing on two resources that are available for inspection both to the participants in the course of the interaction and to the analyst retrospectively: the composition of turns (how they are syntactically and prosodically

designed) and their position (how they are deployed to occupy specific places in the sequential unfolding of the interaction).

The analysis focuses on an episode of interaction between a resident (Giuseppina) and a staff member (Barbara). The recording was transcribed using a simplified version of the approach devised by Gail Jefferson (for an overview, see Schegloff, 2007), capturing features of speech delivery such as timing of pauses and overlaps, emphasis and intonation. A single case analysis of the episode was then carried out.

4. Single case analysis

In CA, a researcher ordinarily deals with “a set of fragments [...] to explicate a single phenomenon or a single domain of phenomena” (Schegloff, 1987, p. 101). In this mode of analysis, a researcher scrutinizes *a collection* of recorded interactions in order to identify the practices and actions through which the participants accomplish the activities in which they engage. The payoff is the possibility of explicating what the participants do through talk and other semiotic resources across different circumstances. By contrast, *single case analysis* focuses on one episode of interaction and seeks to describe the practices through which the participants realize one particular activity.

Insofar as researchers are supposed to produce significant accounts of social action, instead of dwelling on possibly transient and trivial aspects of interaction – which may have manifested themselves only once in a very specific setting –, it seems perfectly right to expect that something useful comes out of a single case analysis. Something more, so to speak, than the mere claim that ‘something happened somewhere, at a certain point in time’. Single case analysis has been put to use to unravel the occasioning circumstances and internal dynamics of particularly puzzling, problematic, or otherwise curious episodes in different institutional settings. For instance, it has been used to make light of the interactional phenomena involved in an emergency call that failed to dispatch an ambulance in a life-threatening situation (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1988); to exhibit how the participants to a therapeutic encounter failed to negotiate a shared understanding of what the client’s problem was (Antaki, Barnes, & Leudar, 2004); or, on a more positive note, to understand how a student managed to negotiate a more active participant role in a learning environment (Waring, 2009). What these studies have in common is that they seek to make sense of particularly interesting episodes, in which things go inexplicably wrong or unexpectedly well, with respect to the institutional goals pursued in the institutional settings where the episodes take place. The analytic approach involves describing the participants’ practices, namely, how they do what they do. The payoff is to show how the auspicious or inauspicious outcomes of these episodes are the methodic achievements of practical courses of action, which embody different, sometimes conflicting, interests and rationalities.

Unlocking such rationalities can provide material for critical reflection, possibly useful in order to review, enhance, or modify the interactional practices that professionals use in their work.

In a similar vein, this study examines a single episode of interaction in order to understand how a resident in a mental health residential centre ends up being blamed for causing a problem that she proposed to clarify in the first place. While the analysis does not cover all the ways in which the staff of the centre address the residents' reported problems, it allows the in-depth exploration of an incident in which considerable tensions arise while negotiating the nature of a problem. This exploration can offer insights on some issues and dilemmas involved in the educational work carried out in a mental health residential centre and make them available to other professionals in other settings for critical reflection.

The findings are displayed by identifying 5 stages in the episode, each presented in a separate section through a transcribed fragment accompanied by a descriptive analysis.

5. Building a framework for problem projection

The episode begins at the point where Massimo (a nurse) gives the floor to Giuseppina (a resident) who has previously signalled that she wishes to talk about something.

- 1 Mas niente c'era la Giuseppina che voleva::
nothing there was Giuseppina who wante:::d
- 2 (0.2)
- 3 Giu volevo spiegare cosa è successo oggi (p- p-) (0.9)
I wanted to explain what happened today (p- p-) (0.9)
((2 lines of extraneous, overlapping talk omitted))
- 6 Giu fra (.) m(h) fra:: fra:: la Carla, (0.3) e la Barbara.
between (.) m(h) between::n between::n Carla, (0.3) and Barbara.
((1 line of extraneous talk omitted))
- 8 (0.7)
- 9 e volevo chiarire (.) cosa voglio dire.
and I wanted to clarify (.) what I mean to say.
- 10 (0.4)
- 11 .hhhhhhhhh (0.4) eh oggi, mi sono [ribellata,
.hhhhhhhhh (0.4) eh today, I [rebelled,
- 12 Mar [()]
- 13 (0.2)
- 14 ([)]
- 15 Giu [alla Carla (0.9) dicendo []
[against Carla (0.9) saying []
- 16 Bar [tch aspetta un attimo Giuseppina.
[tch wait a minute Giuseppina.
- 17 che finisca Mario.

18 so that **Mario finishes.**
 (2.0)
19 Mar fra un mese.
 in a month.
20 (3.9)

In lines 3 through 9, Giuseppina produces a preface (Sacks, 1974) which projects a telling about a trouble: this understanding is made available through the hesitant delivery of Giuseppina's talk, and her concerned and tense intonation. Furthermore, the characterization of her present intention as to "explain what happened" (l. 3) implies that something went wrong. Finally, the trouble has a relational nature, since it is said to have involved Carla (a nurse who is not present at the encounter) and Barbara (an educator who is present at the encounter) (l. 6).

Since 'explaining' (l. 3) and 'clarifying' (l. 9) are types of remedial action, especially in the domain of relational troubles, the upcoming telling is framed as auxiliary to the formulation of a problem. While in "troubles" the focus is on the negative events lived by the teller and her emotional and cognitive reactions to them, in "problems" the focus is on something that needs to be fixed or remedied (Jefferson & Lee, 1981/1992).

Reporting or implying that a problem occurred in the domain of interpersonal relationships may alert the recipients (the staff members) to monitor Giuseppina's talk, in order to understand whether she is placing blame on any of the parties involved. Giuseppina's announcement is rather ambiguous regarding this matter.

By proposing that something needs to be "explain(ed)", Giuseppina may be pointing to the need of accounting for some wrongdoing that she herself committed, an understanding reinforced at ll. 11 and 15, where Giuseppina starts the telling proper. But since Carla and Barbara were also involved in the events to be reported (l. 6), Giuseppina's preface may be heard as locating the problem-source in the relational unit 'Giuseppina + staff members (Carla and Barbara)', and not in the unit 'Giuseppina', suggesting that Carla and Barbara were also partly responsible for its occurrence. This understanding can be reinforced by the expansion of Giuseppina's preface at l. 9 where she claims the intention to "clarify (.) what I mean to say"; by this, she may be heard as implying that she has a position to defend. At ll. 16-17, Barbara invites Giuseppina to temporarily withhold her telling, until another resident, a hard-of-hearing, hard-of-speaking man called Mario has finished talking (his talk, non understandable on tape except for l. 19, has been omitted at some points in the extract, and displayed through empty brackets where it overlaps the participants' talk).

6. Agency shaping in problem formulation

After completion of Mario's talk, Giuseppina is given the floor back and she takes up the telling (l. 22) at the point where she had left it at l. 15.

- 21 Bar *ecco* Giuseppi[na (dai).
there Giuseppi[na (come on).
- 22 Giu [(stavo) dice:ndo che non avevo voglia, (0.2)
[(I was) saying that I didn't feel like, (0.2)
- 23 di: s- (.) (°h h h h) di scopa:re. .h h h h e allora=
s- (.) (°h h h h) sweeping. .h h h h and so=
- 24 vado li: (0.5) vicino (.) e sento che dice °che-° (0.2)
I go there (0.5) close (.) and I hear that she says °that-° (0.2)
- 25 .hh eh- è: (.) e- è inutile. .h h h h la Giuseppina:: (.)
.hh erm- it's (.) i- it's no use. .h h h h Giuseppina:: (.)
- 26 (k)/(che) mh parlava:: ad alta voce di ↑là.
(k)/(that) mh she was talking:: with a loud voice ↑there.
- 27 (0.4)
- 28 °cioè° in cucine:tta. .h h h h in cucina.
°I mean° in the little kitchen. .h h h h in the kitchen.
- 29 Mar ([])
- 30 Giu [.h h h h e::: la Giuseppi:na:
[.h h h h a:::nd Giuseppi:na:
- 31 mi ha ↑de:tto che:: (0.9) no::n ha: vo:glia, (.) .hh io
↑told me tha::t (0.9) she doe::sn't feel like, (.) .hh I
- 32 ho visto che era arrabbiatissima.
saw that she was very angry.
- 33 (0.5)
- 34 °.h h h h h h alora son co- corsa subito da te: Barbara::=mh (1.4)
°.h h h h h h so I ra- ran to you immediately Barbara::=mh (1.4)
- 35 cioè:: (0.5) tu::: non mi ricordo bene com'era.
I mea:::n (0.5) you::: I don't remember well how it was.
- 36 (0.5)
- 37 ? dai Giuseppina su?
come on Giuseppina ADV?
- 38 (0.5)
- 39 Giu e: insomma[::
a::nd so[::
- 40 Mar [([])
- 41 Giu abbiam parlato a lungo di una cosa che non=non
we spoke for long time about something that I didn't=didn't
- 42 riuscivo a [capire cos'e:ra.
manage to [understand what it wa:s.
- 43 Mar [([])
- 44 (1.4)
- 45 Giu e inf:- mh (.) mh perché: (1.0) la Carla diceva .h h h h ma ↑co:me ne
and in fa- mh (.) mh because (1.0) Carla said .h h h h but ↑how come we

- 46 [discutia↑:mo. tu lasciati finir di parla:re mentre noi parliamo.=
[dis↑cuss it. let us finish to talk while we are talking.=
- 47 Mar [()]
- 48 Giu =.hh va bene io gli dicevo ogni ta:nto.
=.hh alright I told her now and then.
- 49 .h[h e allora ti lascio di: finire di parlare poi ri- ricominciavo a parlar=
.h[h and so I let you finish to talk then I st- started to talk again =
- 50 Mar [()]
- 51 Giu =da so:la.
=to myself.
- 52 (1.2)
- 53 po↑i (0.4) .hh (e) tutto (un c-) dal detto al fa↑tto (.) .hhhh son andata su.
the↑n (0.4) .hh (and) all (of a-) next thing I kno↑w (.) .hhhh I went upstairs.
- 54 (1.6)
- 55 e su::, (0.2) .hh non ho dormito neanche dieci minuti.
and upstairs, (0.2) .hh I didn't sleep not even ten minutes.
- 56 (1.1)
- 57 neanche un secondo
not even a second.
- 58 (0.5)
- 59 ? ()
- 60 (1.7)
- 61 Giu .hhh (0.4) i-insomma da li:: (.) dopo ci siam parlate di nuogvo Barbara.
.hhh (0.4) s-so from the::re (.) then we talked again Barbara.
- 62 Mar ([)]
- 63 Giu [e sempre delle stesse co:se. che non so cosa siano
[and always about the same thi:ngs. that I don't know what they are.
- 64 (1.1)
- 65 .hh quelle[: (,) de:- de: de:: della mia (ostinazione) che volevo finire io.
.hh tho:[se, (,) o:f- o:f o:f my (stubbornness) that I wanted to finish.
- 66 Mar [()]
- 67 (0.6)
- 68 Giu di fare pulizie ti ri↑cordi.
to clean do you re↑member.
- 69 (0.3)
- . ((lines omitted where Giuseppina goes on to comment on the conversation that she had with Carla and Barbara))
- 78 Giu .hhh poi:::: (,) prima ancora c'ave::vamo detto tante cose ma adesso
.hhh the::::n (,) before ADV we had told each other many things but now
- 79 [non le [so più.]
[I don't [know them anymore.]
- 80 Mar [()]

The event reported by Giuseppina can be glossed as follows. After lunch², Giuseppina was supposed to tidy up the lunchroom (“sweeping”, l. 23), but she “didn’t feel like” doing it (l. 22). When she approached the kitchen, she heard that Carla, a nurse, was complaining about this (ll. 24-32). Giuseppina then went to Barbara (l. 34). Then Giuseppina, Barbara and Carla became involved in talk about what happened (ll. 39-42); this episode is characterized both as difficult in its management at that time (ll. 45-51) and as hard to recall in the present (ll. 61-63). In this section, we focus on the practices of problem formulation that Giuseppina mobilizes and show how they are intertwined to the characterization of her own agency and responsibility in the reported events.

The interactional task that Giuseppina faces is twofold: while describing the problem, she has to manage her own involvement and stance vis a vis that problem in two different points in time, the past (where the reported events took place) and the present (where the events are being reported) along the following lines. (a) In order to account for the relevance of the telling, Giuseppina has to convey a ‘serious’ concern, warranted in some problematic events. (b) She has also to convey that what happened was not her fault. There’s a practical reason for this: the status of ‘being at fault’ is hardly compatible with the action-types that this telling has been mobilized to promote (i.e. explaining and clarifying, at ll. 3, 9), while it is compatible with other outcomes (e.g. admitting one’s own guilt, apologizing). (c) A way to satisfy the first two constraints is to report someone else’s actions that were a cause for concern, while at the same time portraying the speaker as having limited agency in the reported events. (d) However, by doing so Giuseppina risks being heard as complaining about the staff members, an action-type that might attract the staff members’ rejection and disaffiliation (see Dersley & Wootton, 2000). In what follows we show how she navigates this quite complex dilemma.

Admitting one’s own transgression (22-23). Giuseppina starts her telling with the formulation of a possible transgression or misdeed: she “didn’t feel like” sweeping. Why should the teller of a relational problem start with the formulation of a transgression that she herself did? Two aspects seem to be involved here.

In Potter’s terms, a “confession” may “inoculate” a teller against possible negative inferences about her stake or interest, and work “as a display of honesty and objectivity” (Potter, 1996, p. 130). By starting with her own transgression, Giuseppina may be displaying awareness that the problem was occasioned, at least in part, by her own actions.

A second issue concerns the nature of the reported action. Its formulation (“I didn’t feel like [...] sweeping”) builds it as a quite trivial, ordinary type of transgression³, which would not expectedly attract too negative reactions.

Problem formulation and agency shaping (24-34). Characterizing oneself as the agent of a transgression (ll. 22-23) can make a blame attribution relevant as a sequentially appropriate next action, thus failing to mobilize the recipients’ solidarity. An orienta-

tion to this possibility is displayed in how Giuseppina shapes her own agency in the reported events; although they were set in motion by her initial refusal to do the sweeping, they soon escaped her control. The downgrading of her own agency allows Giuseppina to characterize herself as ‘not at fault’ for what happened. Let us consider how.

When she approached the kitchen, Giuseppina heard that Carla was talking “with a loud voice” (l. 26) and that she was “very angry” (l. 32). This event is presented as what alerted Giuseppina that something was wrong (she “ran” to Barbara immediately afterwards, l. 34). Most notably, the event that materializes the problem is something to which Giuseppina reportedly had limited epistemic access: when she got there, it was already happening. The implication is that she did not cause the problem, because she was not there when it started. Moreover, the trivial nature of the original transgression does not seem to warrant a “very angry” reaction. So, Giuseppina’s agency in the reported events is downgraded to witnessing a negative reaction that she may have inadvertently occasioned, but not caused; as a matter of fact, it came as something unexpected (see Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005).

By contrast, Carla’s agency is upgraded: the fact that her “angry” reaction was not immediate, but delayed suggests a certain deliberateness, thus possibly building it as a complainable conduct (Drew, 1998). This is done without explicitly assessing Carla’s behaviour, but by leaving it to the recipients to infer that it was in fact reprehensible (Mandelbaum, 1991/1992).

According to Pomerantz, “part of how a complaint is formed is to provide for the recognisability of the offender’s wrongdoings” (1986, p. 221) and a way to provide for such recognisability is to employ devices to convey that the teller is merely reporting ‘the facts’ and that she’s not biased against the third party whose actions are being reported (Edwards, 2005). One such device is the reported speech (Stivers, 2008) through which Giuseppina attends to what Carla ‘literally’ said without commenting on it (ll. 24-25, 31). A second one is indexing her own emotional reaction, through the formulation “I saw that she was very angry”, which is uttered with a ‘concerned’ intonation (l. 32), conveying that Carla’s behaviour was a source of concern, but again without overtly evaluating it. These combined resources contribute to the problem formulation while at the same time shaping the agency of the persons involved: Carla played an active role, while Giuseppina’s participation was restricted to hearing (l. 24) and seeing (l. 32) what was going on.

Giuseppina then ran to Barbara “immediately” (34). “Immediately” is an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that helps Giuseppina to make her case stronger: of all the available time points after the occurrence of the trouble, Giuseppina exploited the first available opportunity to accomplish what can be considered as an appropriate next action after noticing a problem, namely, seeking help. By inserting this detail, Giuseppina again exhibits an orientation to the accountability of her own involvement in the reported events: having already cast

herself as not involved in causing the problem, she now portrays herself as the one who started a remedial course of action. At the same time, she seems to be working up the relationship between herself and Barbara, by characterizing Barbara as someone to whom she can turn in case of trouble to obtain help.

Claiming difficulty and trying to 'pass the baton' (35-51). Giuseppina reports a conversation with Carla and Barbara, which presumably constituted a first attempt to 'clarify' what had happened. This episode is characterized as hard to remember in the present (l. 35) and as difficult to understand when it occurred (l. 42). Additional detailing of the episode (ll. 45-46) suggests that it may have raised interactional tensions among the parties involved and reveals that Giuseppina encountered communication difficulties (ll. 49, 51).

Some analysis of the staff members' conduct is relevant now: up to this point, they have refrained from talking. More precisely, there are gaps after completion of the turn-units composing Giuseppina's narrative where there is no verbal uptake of any kind. The issue is: has Giuseppina's telling come to a point where presentation of the problem has been recognizably completed, and thus can be relevantly addressed by the staff members? Given that she reports difficulties in reconstructing the events (ll. 35-42) and that the story preface (ll. 22-23) anticipated that the narrative would provide access to something in need of 'explanation' or 'clarification', the staff members might be withholding participation in order to grant Giuseppina additional opportunities to provide a more complete and unambiguous account.

At the same time, though, claiming difficulty in reconstructing the events (ll. 42, 79) could be understood as an implicit request to provide assistance in the effort to understand what happened. In this case, recipients could orient to Giuseppina's narrative as conveying a request for assistance to make sense of the reported events, e.g. to figure out why they led to relational tensions between the parties involved. Giuseppina does not ask for help, but she makes available a framework where the staff members could volunteer an offer of assistance as an appropriate next action⁴. There are at least three such junctures: at ll. 42, 51 and 55. Notably, the endings of these turn-units are followed by gaps that are sensibly longer than those in the previous part of the narrative. After these gaps, Giuseppina extends her telling; however, at ll. 57 and 61 she adds material that does not provide new information, but reformulates what has already been said; furthermore, she starts to solicit uptake from Barbara (68). Starting from l. 42, then, Giuseppina seems to be repeatedly trying to "pass the baton" to the staff members (Robinson & Heritage, 2005). It is arguable that at these points the recipients are visibly withholding a response, a practice that may forecast a disaffiliative and disagreeing stance (Schegloff, 2007).

Some ambiguities in Giuseppina's narrative over 'what the problem is' might have to do with the delaying of the staff members' uptake. The narrative offers at least two possible problem formulations: (a) understanding (l. 42), communicative (ll.

49, 51), and emotional (l. 55) difficulties ascribable to Giuseppina; (b) *relational* difficulties ascribable to the unit ‘Giuseppina + staff members’. By delaying a response, the staff members might be monitoring Giuseppina’s ongoing narrative to see whether one of these problem formulations is consolidated.

7. Building a framework for problem conversion

To summarize: so far, Giuseppina has reported a relational problem involving Carla (a nurse), but without overtly accusing her. At the same time, she has made available a framework where: (a) the reported problem can be seen as, at least in part, originated by Carla’s actions; (b) a provision of help may be projected as a sequentially appropriate next action, in order to make sense of what happened. Barbara’s response exhibits an orientation to the second aspect.

- 81 Bar [.hhhh a]scolta Giuseppi[na ()
[.hhhh li]sten Giuseppi[na ()
- 82 Giu [dimmi te:. (.) dai.
[you tell me. (.) come on.
- 83 Bar io:: non [ho capito] (0.4) perché tu ti sei arrabbiata.=
I:: [didn’t understand] (0.4) why you got angry.=
- 84 Giu [cos’hai capito.]
[what you understood.]
- 85 Bar per cui in realtà: .hhh dopo non abbiamo mai (.) chiarito.=
so actually: .hhh then we have never (.) clarified.=
- 86 Giu =(per[ché)
= (wh[y)
- 87 Bar [perché:, (0.2) eh forse non ce l’hai chiaro tu↑: (.) e i- e io e
[because, (0.2) eh maybe it’s not clear to you↑: (.) and I- and I and
- 88 Carla non abbiamo capito
perché ti sei arr- arrabbiata,]
Carla haven’t understood
wh[y you got a- angry,]
- 89 Giu [e neanch’io! (.) non so perché mi dico così.
[and neither I! (.) I don’t know wh[y I talk like [this.
- 90 Bar [eh
- 91 (0.6)
- 92 Mar ([)
- 93 Bar [come facciamo per cercare di capire perché ti sei arrabi↑a:[:ta.
[how do we do to try to understand why you got ↑an[gr[y.
- 94 Giu [ri- (0.4)
[we re- (0.4)
- 95 °m-mh° (.) riprendiamo il discorso di prima?
°m-mh° (.) we resume our previous talk?
- 96 (0.3)
- 97 Bar allora: (0.4)
so: (0.4)

98 Giu t[u pressappoco non hai una traccia?
[don't you have a clue more or less?
 99 Bar [↑tu (hai-)
[↑you (have-)
 100 (0.8)

Barbara resists embracing the role of ‘helper’ made relevant by Giuseppina’s problem formulation (ll. 81-83). She does not produce an explicit rejection (such as ‘I can’t help you’), but she claims insufficient understanding of the situation. By virtue of its positioning after Giuseppina’s narrative, this claim can be heard as an account for not being able to provide help in clarifying what happened (l. 83). Barbara then subtly shifts the focus from addressing the problem described by Giuseppina to reframing that problem. Notably, the problem referenced by Barbara (“why you got angry”, ll. 83 and 88) is a problem-type for which only Giuseppina (and not the unit ‘Giuseppina + staff members’) can be held accountable.

Barbara’s reframing of the problem draws on the same resources used by Giuseppina (upgrading/downgrading the agency and epistemic access of the persons involved), but in a reversed manner. In her own version, the staff members’ agency was restricted to witnessing an inexplicable event (Giuseppina’s reaction) over which they had no control, nor any means to interpret it (ll. 87-88). Disclaiming epistemic access to the causes of Giuseppina’s “angry” reaction also implies that the staff members did nothing to cause it. Giuseppina is characterized as the only active agent in the reported events, and the only one who is entitled to ‘explain’ what happened (l. 87). With respect to Emerson and Messinger’s (1977) distinction between intervention-types, Barbara can be seen as accomplishing a transition from a relational view of the reported problem – a view otherwise available in Giuseppina’s version of the events – to an interpretive framework where the problem can be dealt with through a one-sided intervention. This becomes manifest in what comes next.

Having obtained Giuseppina’s affiliation (l. 89), Barbara opens a new sequence, attributing responsibility for problem-resolution to Giuseppina (l. 93). She does not refer to the problem anaphorically, but she extensively restates it (“why you got ↑an[gry.”), thus displaying special commitment to a projected problem-resolution phase of the conversation that references *that* problem (Giuseppina’s unexpected reaction) and not other possible problems. Giuseppina proposes to resume the “previous talk” (l. 95) and explicitly asks for Barbara’s assistance.

8. Promoting problem reformulation

In the preceding spate of talk, Barbara has made a provision of help contingent upon a reframing of the original problem which seems to prepare the ground for a

one-sided intervention. In the ‘one-sided’ interpretive framework, the only puzzle to be solved is Giuseppina’s inexplicable angry reaction, not the nurse’s behaviour (see l. 89 where Giuseppina seems to align to this kind of selective reading of the problem). It’s to this kind of undertaking that Barbara commits herself (see l. 97). A certain circularity may be noted at this point: Barbara works to promote a new reading of the problem where reference to the nurse’s possibly inappropriate behaviour is systematically expunged. This is manifest in the continuation of the episode, where Barbara prompts Giuseppina to re-tell her story. As it happens, the design of the prompt is revealing: the marked emphasis on the ‘you’-pronoun (l. 101) works to propose Giuseppina’s original refusal to sweep the lunchroom as the element that should occupy a central place in the new version of the problem – a version that is produced in the service of finally achieving a clarification and a remedy.

- 101 Bar allora (0.4) partiamo da quando (0.2) tu↑: (0.2) hai detto che non volevi pulire.
so (0.4) let’s start from when (0.2) you↑: (0.2) said that you didn’t want to clean.
- 102 (0.3)
- 103 Giu .hh (0.6) perché:, (0.2) non ne avevo voglia.
.hh (0.6) because, (0.2) I didn’t feel like doing it.
- 104 e ho detto (.)
and I said (.)
- 105 Mar ([)
- 106 Bar ok[ay.
- 107 Giu [Carla! (0.2) non ho voglia di (e:h m:h de:) scopare.
[Carla! (0.2) I don’t feel like (erm m:h PREP) sweeping.
- 108 (0.7)
- 109 mi ai[utà- eh no. .hhh (.) Carla non ne ho voglia.
can you [he- eh no. .hhh (.) Carla I don’t feel like doing it.
- 110 Mar [()
- 111 (0.4)
- 112 Bar o:[kay.
- 113 Giu [di scopare.
[sweeping.
- 114 (.)
- 115 .h[h e lei allora ha detto (0.9)
.h[h and so she said (0.9)
- 116 Bar [esatto.
[exactly.
- 117 Mar ()
- 118 Giu cioè (.) quando io: se[ntivo (.) che parlav[a,
I mean (.) when I: [heard (.) her tal[king,
((2 lines of extraneous talk omitted))
- 121 Giu diceva

- she was saying**
 122 eh eh- di me:.
eh eh- about me:.
 123 (0.4)
 124 .hhh allora da lì (.) .hhh pareva che mi levassero le unghie.
.hhh so there (.) .hhh it seemed that they were pulling out my nails.
 125 (1.1)
 126 ? ([])-
 127 Bar [ma perché ti pareva che ti levassero le unghie?
[but why did it seem that they were pulling out your nails?
 128 (.)
 129 co[sa ha detto la [Carla?]
wh[at did Carla [say?]
 130 Giu [e-
 131 Giu [che mi] che mi torturassero inso:mma.
[that they] that they were torturing me I mean.
 132 (0.3)
 133 .hhh (.) [per sentire dire quel discorso che la Carla ha detto.
.hhh (.) [hearing those things that Carla said.
 134 Bar [(può darsi)-
[(maybe)-
 135 (0.4)
 136 Bar ma (0.7) perché hai (l'i:) (.) .hh pe:nsi (.) che fosse come una tortura?
but (0.7) why do you get (the:) (.) .hh do you think (.) that it was a
torture?
 137 (0.3)
 138 Giu .hh (1.0) (°mh-°) (0.8) non era u::n: motivo di dire così.=m::h
.hh (1.0) (°mh-°) (0.8) there was n::o: reason to say so.=m::h
 139 perché pensavo che mi castiga:sse.
because I thought that she would punish me.
 140 (0.4)
 141 Bar ma è successo qualche volta che tu venga
but has it ever happened that you were
 142 casti[ga:ta?
puni[shed?
 143 ? [([)
 144 Giu [no non mi avete mai castiga:ta.
[no you've never punished me.
 145 (0.5)

There is evidence that Barbara moves in the direction of a one-sided intervention. She ratifies (ll. 106, 112) and even confirms the truth-value (l. 116) of those components in Giuseppina's telling where she reports her own wrongdoings. However, from l. 115 Giuseppina starts again to describe the nurse's actions and at l. 124 she describes an aggravated emotional reaction to those actions, a practice that upgrades the complainability of the nurse's conduct (see Stokoe & Hepburn,

2005). By doing so, Giuseppina exhibits that she's not ready to abandon a relational view of the problem, where the nurse can be seen as co-implicated in generating the complained-of situation. Notably, at this point Barbara modifies her up-to-this-point aligning stance and starts to challenge Giuseppina's report.

When Giuseppina details her own emotional reaction to Carla's complaining about her (l. 124), in next position (after a gap that forecasts disaffiliation) Barbara asks "why" (l. 127). CA research on wh-questions in English (the equivalent of the class of question words to which the Italian "perché" belongs) has shown that they can be used to challenge a prior claim (Koshik, 2003). The same pragmatic function of wh-questions has been observed across different settings and languages (Egbert & Vöge, 2008; Heinemann, 2009; Monzoni, 2008). That this is the case here can be demonstrated with reference to what happens next.

Giuseppina hears Barbara's utterance as an invitation to clarify the meaning of the idiomatic expression "pulling out my nails", but this understanding is repaired by Barbara at l. 136, by clarifying that she's inviting Giuseppina to provide grounds for her "think(ing) that it was a torture" (where "it" anaphorically references Carla's behaviour). Now Giuseppina orients to the challenge-forecasting aspect of Barbara's utterance by 'admitting' that she had no valid grounds for thinking that she was being tortured (138). Then, she further explicates her perspective: she thought that Carla would punish her (139).

Barbara's subsequent utterance (141) is a type of yes-no question that Koshik (2003) described as a reversed polarity question: an utterance not meant to be heard as an information-seeking device, but as the corresponding negative assertion 'it has never happened that you were punished'. This understanding is grounded in the design of the utterance: the turn-initial "but" marks disagreement and the extreme case formulation "ever" (an attempt of idiomatic translation of "qualche volta", literally "any time") sounds as a challenge to find even a single instance of punishment in the past. Furthermore, the utterance is positioned in an environment of already established disagreement (Koshik, 2003). Finally, it references a subject "over which the questioner has greater claim to knowledge" (Koshik, 2003, p. 72). Presumably, Barbara would not ask a question about such a delicate issue (i.e. punishment) if she did not have good reasons to believe that Giuseppina will not find examples of punishments that she may have suffered in the past. In sum, this interrogatively formatted utterance is not meant to be treated as a question, but as the reversed polarity assertion 'you've never been punished', with which Giuseppina agrees (l. 144).

The trajectory continues with Barbara further encouraging Giuseppina to make explicit her grounds for being afraid that she would be punished. In the kind of sequential environment observable here, having Giuseppina disclose her grounds for being preoccupied offers Barbara the possibility to challenge those grounds in next position (see Hutchby, 1996).

- 146 Bar e allora perché hai pensato che ti avremmo potuto castiga:re?
and so why did you think that we could punish you?
- 147 Giu .hhh (0.7) hhhhh (0.2) perché: avevo sentito quel discorso ↑li e pensavo
.hhh (0.7) hhhhh (0.2) because I had heard those things ↑there and I thought
- 148 a cose, .hhhh m:::h vecchi e::h (0.3) e:h ricordi ancora di quando mi
 arrabbio,
about things, .hhhh m:::h old e::h (0.3) e:h memories about when I got angry,
- 149 (0.6)
- 150 Mas e che ti castigavano.
and they punished you.
- 151 (0.2)
- 152 Giu sì.
yes.
- 153 Bar ma questo dove succedeva?
but where did this happen?
- 154 (0.4)
- 155 ? ()
- 156 (0.3)
- 157 Giu ma là::[: dov'ero una vo:lta. no qua in- in comunità son sempre stata brava.
but the::[:re where I was once. not here at- at the centre I've always been good.
- 158 Mar [()]
- 159 (0.2)
- 160 Bar ma qua (.) è successo ancora che qualcuno ti abbia castiga:to?
but here (.) has it ever happened that someone punished you?
- 161 (0.3)
- 162 Giu .hh no.
- 163 (1.0)
- 164 Bar e allora perché avremmo dovuto farlo oggi?
and so why should we have done it today?
- 165 (0.9)
- 166 Giu eh.
- 167 (1.2)
- 168 Bar però Giuseppina: (.)
but Giuseppina: (.)

At ll. 147-8, Giuseppina grounds her fear of being punished in what she experienced in the past in another residential centre. While the other staff member, Massimo, takes a different tack by acknowledging Giuseppina's experience (l. 150), Barbara goes on to produce challenges. It can be noticed that Barbara's interrogatively formatted utterance at l. 153 is received as a challenge by Giuseppina who, after addressing its information-gathering component in the first turn-unit at l. 157, goes on to admit that her past experience does not apply to the present situation. At l. 160 Barbara produces another yes-no question (l. 160) that conveys the

corresponding negative assertion ‘here it has never happened that someone punished you’, with which Giuseppina agrees (l. 162). Barbara produces an additional challenge, defying Giuseppina to provide grounds for the possibility that she would be punished “today” (l. 164). The token “eh” at l. 166 is produced (and received by Barbara) as an admission that such grounds do not exist. At the same time, Giuseppina does not pursue any other attempt to warrant her reported concern. As a result, she is now in a position where her grounds for being preoccupied by Carla’s reaction have been undermined. This leads to a scenario where Giuseppina can be treated as the only party accountable for the reported relational problem.

9. Delivering a remedy

Undermining Giuseppina’s problem formulation has opened the doors to a new understanding of the reported events, which Barbara finally delivers.

- 169 Giu d[immi te una cosa a[datta dai.
t[ell me a right [thing come on.
- 170 Bar [una cosa. [tu devi impara↑re (.) ad ascoltare le perso:ne, (0.3)
[one thing. [you must ↑learn (.) to listen to people, (0.3)
- 171 quando ti dicono le cose.
when they tell you things.
- 172 (0.6)
- 173 la Carla assolutamente non ti ha detto né che ti avrebbe castiga:to, (0.4)
Carla absolutely didn’t tell you neither that she would punish you, (0.4)
- 174 e neanche ti ha costretto a fare le cose
nor she forced you to do things.
- 175 semplicemente è venuta da me:, (0.4) per dirmi Barbara (0.2) chiariamo
she simply came to me, (0.4) to tell me Barbara (0.2) let’s clear up
- 176 come mai la Giuseppina non ha vo:glia.
why Giuseppina doesn’t feel like ((sweeping)).
- 177 (1.7)
- 178 ma solo per capire!
but only to understand!
- 179 (.)
- 180 perché vogliamo capi↑re (0.2) cos’era scatta[:to
because we want to under↑stand (0.2) what ha[ppened⁵

While Barbara’s formulation of the problem and remedy continues in the original recording and transcript, it will be enough, for present purposes, to focus on its inception (ll. 170-180). Barbara finally ‘clarifies’ the problem by unambiguously locating the problem-source in Giuseppina’s misunderstanding of the situation: if she had listened to the staff members (ll. 170-1), nothing wrong would have happened. The implicit blame ascription embedded in the proposed remedy (“you

must †learn (.) to listen to people”, l. 170) makes it sound as a reproach and a correction. What is remarkable is that, by virtue of the interactional work accomplished after Giuseppina’s first problem-formulation (ll. 81-168), this reproach/correction is delivered *as* a response to Giuseppina’s request for help (see the ‘help’-formulations at ll. 168, 170).

To sum up: before delivering a response to the request for help (see l. 98), Barbara engaged Giuseppina in a reformulation of her problem. Notably, at l. 93 Barbara framed Giuseppina’s angry reaction as the only puzzle in need of explication. The interactional work subsequently done to solve that puzzle strongly focused on Giuseppina’s lack of valid grounds to be afraid of being punished and thus, by implication, on her misunderstanding of the staff members’ intentions. That misunderstanding is now oriented to as at least partly deliberate (Drew, 1998) and thus as complainable, inasmuch as Giuseppina did not ‘listen’ to the staff members when they tried to clarify the situation the first time (ll. 170-171). Interestingly, this analysis was already available in Giuseppina’s telling at ll. 49 and 65 where she referenced her tendency to talk instead of listening and her ‘stubbornness’. However, Barbara now addresses this issue as the only problem that needs to be solved (ll. 170-171). As a result, Giuseppina is characterized as the only party who has to modify her conduct.

The interactional practices used by Barbara have led to an apparently paradoxical outcome, the noticing of which mobilized the present enquiry in the first place: the response that Giuseppina now receives can be interactionally characterised both as providing the help that she requested *and* as blaming her for causing the problem for which she sought help. We can also note that, under the auspices of this unilateral blame-attribution, Barbara is in a favourable position to address the issue of Carla’s alleged responsibility in co-determining the reported problem, by deploying an overt defence of her conduct (ll. 173-180).

10. Discussion

This study analysed a single episode of interaction where Giuseppina, a resident in a mental health residential centre, addresses a relational problem involving one of her caregivers. The initial puzzle was: ‘how can a resident end up being blamed for a problem that she proposed to clarify in the first place?’

A single case analysis of the episode was performed. A limitation of this procedure is that, unlike studies carried out on collections of instances, it cannot display how an activity – here, addressing residents’ reported relational problems – is accomplished across a range of situations and through different practices. However, it allows what the former mode of presentation inhibits: a fuller explication of the internal dynamics of an episode of interaction, enriched by a detailed description of the practical resources that the participants bring to bear to pursue their goals in that particular spate of talk. This line of investigation has been selected for this re-

port, since it may offer a more rich account and foster reflection about some of the intricacies entailed in the management of a critical incident in mental health residential treatment. It is to these issues that we turn in this concluding section.

The episode presents a possibly familiar occurrence in a setting where professionals and clients share responsibilities in the everyday management of activities such as cooking, cleaning, and so on. A resident, Giuseppina, expressed that she “didn’t feel like” performing one of the activities that she was supposed to carry out (sweeping the lunchroom) and this led to tensions with her caregivers. What is interesting is the ways that the participants make sense of this event and how they formulate it as a problem.

From the outset of her narrative (indeed, from the story-preface) Giuseppina displays an orientation to the stakes entailed in presenting a relational problem that involved one of her caregivers – a nurse called Carla. This orientation materializes in the cautious handling of features such as the distribution of agency and responsibility between the parties involved in the reported events. While the careful, sometimes hesitant, manipulation of these aspects makes her narrative partly ambiguous, it nevertheless makes available a view of the problem in which all the parties (Giuseppina + nurse Carla) can be seen as contributing to its generation.

When a staff member, Barbara, intervenes, it becomes clear that her line of action is informed by a significantly divergent set of interests, materializing in a systematic effort to achieve a one-sided view of the problem – according to the distinction between one-sided and relational interventions introduced by Emerson and Messinger (1977). In order to achieve this view, she puts to use two types of resources. The first is fact selection: Barbara commits herself to demonstrate that Giuseppina’s emotional reaction – being afraid that she would be punished – is ungrounded in her past experience at the centre. At the same time, Barbara systematically avoids dealing with how the nurse’s reported conduct *per se* – that is, with no particular reference to prior experience – may have grounded Giuseppina’s fear of being punished, in spite of the fact that Giuseppina makes available such an interpretation (ll. 118-124). The second set of resources enables the transition to an interpretive framework that is compatible with a one-sided view of the problem. This is achieved by systematically emphasizing Giuseppina’s agency in the reported events, while denying the staff members’ responsibility in causing the problem. The combined use of these resources enables Barbara to achieve control of both *what* to talk about *how* to talk about it. The term ‘control’ is carefully weighted: in order to carry out problem-reformulation, Barbara not only exploits the asymmetrical distribution of speaking rights which is to be found in many institutional settings (Antaki et al., 2004; Drew, 1991), but she also tries to inhibit Giuseppina from pursuing her own view of the problem. The achieved one-sided perspective is not so much the result of negotiation and compromise, as it is the

result of Giuseppina's 'capitulation' to pursue a more relational view of the reported problem.

As promised, the results of the investigation proposed here can provide useful insights to foster critical reflection about some of the intricacies that can be involved in mental health residential treatment. These can be traced on two levels. First, this particular episode reflects some important issues involved in the tasks and goals that staff members (educators, nurses, care workers) pursue in residential centres. The literature on the subject stresses staff members' mandate to support the residents and to help them cope with their problems autonomously. The former concern may transpire in Barbara's reassurance, at ll. 178 and 180, that the staff members do not have hostile feelings toward Giuseppina. The latter concern (fostering autonomous coping) may be reflected in Barbara's delayed delivery of a remedy, which may find its rationale in offering Giuseppina opportunities to deal with the problem on her own. At the same time, though, the episode reflects other issues involved in the staff members' mandate. Specifically, the staff members are the representatives of an institution and, as such, they are accountable for actions that may impact on the residents' safety and wellbeing. An orientation to this concern is manifest in Barbara's provided stance at ll. 173-174, where she claims that Clara did not punish Giuseppina and that she did not force her to do anything. 'Punishing' and 'forcing' can be heard as reprehensible behaviours, contrary to the general institutional mandate to positively support the residents. They contrast with other action-types, such as 'clearing things up' and 'understanding', which Barbara attributes to Carla and to herself (ll. 175-180). The extreme case formulations with which Barbara delivers her perspective at ll. 173-180 ("absolutely", "simply", "only") emphasise that Carla restricted herself to types of action that could not have possibly threatened Giuseppina's wellbeing. So, by conveying this view, Barbara seems committed to defend the staff against possible criticism and to preempt complaints that could resurface later and shed a negative light on the staff members' professionalism. As a matter of fact, in spite of Giuseppina's initial efforts to prevent an interpretation of her problem-presentation as an accusation against the staff members, Barbara seems to interpret that problem-presentation in the more hostile manner and to act accordingly, by taking an adversarial and defensive stance.

A second set of considerations concerns the effects and implications of the practices described in this paper. We notice that the practices employed by Barbara allow to keep the staff members' record clean at the cost of disconfirming the resident's understanding of the events. In order to achieve a one-sided view of the problem, Barbara does not immediately focus on Carla's behaviours (this happens later, at ll. 173-180), but on Giuseppina's conveyed stance and emotional reaction, which Barbara works to undermine (from l. 127). The account that, in the end, shifts the blame away from Carla is grounded in a demonstration of Giuseppina's

failure to properly understand the reported events. As a matter of fact, Barbara's proffered analysis of the problem coincides with a 'no-problem' account. In her version of the events, the staff members did nothing to cause Giuseppina's concern; they only acted to understand why *she* became angry. The implication, then, is that an inherently 'no-problem' situation led to some tensions, but only because of the resident's failure to properly interpret the staff members' best intentions. Barbara's defence of the staff members' record is grounded in a demonstration of Giuseppina's incompetence to interpret a social situation and in disconfirming the validity of her experiences of concern and fear.

While no claim is made here that this is the only way used to receive the residents' problem formulations, this episode may be regarded as a critical incident in order to sensitize professionals to the intricacies and challenges involved in addressing residents' reported problems. What has been tried here is an in-depth display of the practical problems that both residents and staff members can face when dealing with a relational problem, accompanied by a discussion of the implications of one particular way of navigating these problems: defending the staff members' record at the cost of disconfirming the validity of the resident's reported experience.

Appendix: transcription symbols

The transcription conventions used in this paper are a simplified version of those used in CA and originally devised by Gail Jefferson. In the data fragments, the first line shows the original Italian version, and the second line shows an attempt of idiomatic translation in English.

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

Notes

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² This understanding was not available through the recording but through the observational field work that I carried out at the residential centre.

³ The first attempt of story-beginning at ll. 11 and 15, interrupted by Barbara, contained a formulation with sharper moral overtones, abandoned in this re-editing.

⁴ An explicit request is made only later, in overlap at lines 82-84, after Barbara has to respond.

⁵ Literally “sprang up”.

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