Beyond accessing information: Claiming to understand in child social welfare interviews

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The present article investigates how people manage understanding of personal experiences in an institutional setting in which shared understanding of one party's experience can become an issue at stake: social welfare interviews with child victims of abuse. New recommendations on how to respond to child interviewees limit interviewers' support to experiences of which they have direct access. Using conversation analysis and discursive psychology to examine cases in which interviewers respond to children's reports of experiences by claiming to understand, the current article shows that interviewers primarily use such claims after interviewees have indicated that the interviewer may not understand. By claiming to understand, interviewers orient to a difference between an interview requirement—not assuming they know the children's specific experiences—and their ability to interpret the children's situations. The study shows how interviewers use claims of understanding to distinguish themselves as understanding persons from their information-eliciting approach as social welfare investigators. Findings contribute to social psychological research on how people manage challenges related to eliciting and recognizing experience in interaction. In particular, the study offers research on interviews with child victims of abuse a new angle on the tension between information elicitation and support.

Researchers with an interest in social interaction have begun to show that people treat the intersubjectivity of experience—its elicitation, display, and reception—as a moral accomplishment (Heritage, 2002, 2011; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). This research has demonstrated that people hold one another accountable for designing turns in ways that are sensitive to the particular other they are talking to (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Wilkinson, 2011). Furthermore, research shows that when acknowledging others' experiences, people attend to the teller's stance towards the experience as well as their own access to the experienced event (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Heritage, 2011; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Humä, 2015; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). The current article contributes to the empirical study of how people manage shared understanding of personal experiences. It does so by focusing on an institutional setting in which shared understanding of one party's experience can become an issue at stake: social welfare interviews with child victims of abuse.

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Studies in social psychology have shown that institutional settings offer specific constraints that can facilitate or hinder professionals’ acknowledgement of clients’ experiences (Hepburn & Potter, 2007). For example, Ruusuvuori (2005) showed that participants in health care settings treated advice giving as a relevant response to descriptions of problematic experiences, whereas Weatherall and Stubbe (2015) showed that call takers’ neutral responses in dispute resolution services could generate escalating emotionality. In these service encounters, the client has often requested a service and the professionals can suggest a solution that indicates how they make sense of the client’s experiences. By contrast, investigative interviews in child social work seldom begin with the child’s description of problematic experiences and offer children few clues about how the interviewer has understood their experiences – the focus of the encounter is to elicit information. Still, recent research in forensic psychology has acknowledged the need for a supportive environment when child victims of abuse are being interviewed (Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, & Horowitz, 2006). Thus, interviewers may face the challenge of taking an information-eliciting stance while still recognizing the children’s experiences (cf. Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Katz, 2014). Although participants’ orientations to understanding in such interviews merit investigation, the existing research on interviews with child victims of abuse (Deckert, 2010; Iversen, 2012, 2014; Jol & Stommel, 2016) concerns interviewers’ questions and children’s answers, not how interviewers receive children’s experiences.

This article draws on an action-oriented understanding of language and social interaction articulated by scholars in conversation analysis (CA; cf. Schegloff, 2007) and discursive psychology (DP; cf. Potter, 2012) to examine in detail cases in which interviewers topicalize their understanding. Although interviewers communicate understanding in many ways, initial examination showed that interviewers primarily use claims of understanding after interviewees’ have indicated that the interviewer may have problems understanding their experiences of the past or the interview. By claiming to understand, the interviewers orient to a difference between their information-eliciting project and their ability to understand as co-conversationalists. The study contributes to CA and DP research on how people manage the intersubjectivity of experience. It offers a new angle on the tension between information elicitation and support in interviews with child victims of abuse.

**Interviewing and understanding**

Interview research can be broadly divided into two traditions: studies that use interviews as tools for collecting information and studies that investigate actions in different kinds of interviews. Researchers who use interviews to elicit information have recently begun to acknowledge that many suspected victims do not describe their experiences when interviewed formally (Ahern & Lyon, 2013; Goodman & Melinder, 2007; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Lyon, Scurish, Choi, Handmaker, & Blank, 2012). Interviews characterized by supportive comments from interviewers have yielded more interviewee reports in line with documented abuse (Hershkowitz *et al.*, 2006). Thus, in a revised version of the widely used and researched protocol published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), interviewers are instructed to echo children’s talk and to positively reinforce children’s efforts but not the content of their responses. In addition, the guidelines ask interviewers to express empathy with the difficulties of the interview process but not with children’s past experiences.
(Hershkowitz et al., 2014, p. 340). As interviewers can only repeat what they have heard or comment on the interview situation, these recommendations limit support to experiences to which the interviewer has access in a literal sense.

Researchers in CA and DP who investigate action in interviews have shown how interview participants manage institutional and interpersonal requirements. For example, social workers and police officers in forensic interviews ask questions that can be taken as offensive in mundane interactions, such as whether the child knows what telling the truth means (Deckert, 2010) or how children came to know what they say (Jol & Stommel, 2016). Childs and Walsh (2017) show that interviewers attend to the interpersonal implications of such requirements: The police interviewers in their study used self-deprecating self-references (e.g., ‘I’m going deaf, that’s all’) to handle the conflicting demands of appearing engaged while also posing the repeated questions needed for effective evidence gathering. Studies of interviewers’ reception of child interviewees’ descriptions of their experiences are still scarce. In a study of police interviews with adults with intellectual disabilities who had reported sexual abuse, Antaki, Richardson, Stokoe, and Willott (2015) show that police officers never acknowledged alleged victims’ past distress but sometimes acknowledged the distress associated with talking about abuse. Such practices resonate with the recommendations described in the forensic literature and produce reports in line with legal requirements (Hershkowitz et al., 2014).

Experience recognition

Conversation analysis has shown the fruitfulness of studying intersubjectivity in terms of action recognition—that is, the ways people show that they understand what someone is doing in a turn of talk. The term alignment refers to how people show that they understand and support each other’s conversational projects—for example, providing an answer to a question (cf. Stivers, 2008; Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011). In addition, CA studies are increasingly examining what I here call experience recognition: the ways people show that they understand and support others’ experiences (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Ruusuvuori, 2005). This line of research examines how people communicate their experiences by taking a stance; for example, people may take an epistemic stance to indicate how they know about an event, or they may take an emotional stance to indicate how they feel about it (cf. Pomerantz, 1984; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014; Stivers, 2008). The recipient of such a stance can use the following turn to communicate understanding—to affiliate—with the stance. In line with a general CA take on intersubjectivity (Robinson, 2014; Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1992), this approach allows us to trace understanding turn-by-turn, as it is available to the participants in interaction.

Heritage (2011; cf. Heritage & Raymond, 2005) has shown that people orient to sharability as a matter of access; relatively typical experiences are more easily shared (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). At the same time, more specific experiences may obligate stronger empathic responses so that recipients can show that they really understand (Heritage, 2011; cf. Schegloff, 2000). Repeating what somebody said may not suffice to show ones understanding. Rather, by displaying an independent interpretation, people show that they are not just going along with what the other says (Heritage, 2002; Sacks, 1992II, p. 252f). Actions that reveal an independent analysis may be second stories or parallel assessments, both of which treat the specific experience as something generally sharable (Heritage, 2011), or response cries, which communicate that the recipient is living the experience vicariously (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; cf. Goffman, 1978). In a study of
claims of understanding together with psychological formulations (e.g., ‘I understand your concern’), Weatherall and Keevallik (2016) show that people use them to advance their own agenda – claiming understanding while their actions may suggest the opposite. Claims of understanding may therefore be devices for communicating a general prosocialness – an affiliative stance towards the other’s project – rather than affiliating with the action or stance in the previous turn. In this way, they may work similarly to pro forma agreement as a device for mitigating the social implications of dispreferred actions (cf. Schegloff, 2007).

Accordingly, research on experience recognition – displays and claims of understanding – shows that affiliation is a complex matter and that we need to further study how participants navigate conversational moves that may not be simply supportive or unsupportive. Drawing on previous findings about how people orient to the sharability of others’ experiences in mundane and institutional settings, I examine actions in which claims of understanding are involved in child social welfare investigative interviews. My analysis contributes to the understudied area of how interviewers respond to interviewees’ reports of experiences.

**Data and analytic approach**

I analysed 14 hr of audio-recorded child social welfare interviews with 25 children between 5 and 17 years old who had been identified as victims of domestic violence. The interviews were conducted in 2015–2018 by social workers in four agencies in Sweden. In two cases, the children were interviewed with a sibling present, and in four cases with the primary caseworker conducting the interview and a second caseworker present. The timing of the interview in relation to the child’s contact with social services varied, but in all cases, interviewers and interviewees had met before in the capacity of client and social worker. The primary aim of the interviews was to provide grounds for a relevant support intervention by generating information about the child’s well-being and exposure to risks. Accordingly, unlike forensic interviews, these interviews targeted the children’s needs rather than demands for evidence to convict a perpetrator. However, like forensic interviews, the goal was to get the children’s unaffected stories. Data collection and analytic procedures were approved by the Central Ethical Review Board in Sweden (Dnr 32-2016).

The focus on claims of understanding was a result of unmotivated examination (cf. Sacks, 1984) of audio-recordings and transcriptions of the interviews. Initially, I collected and analysed interviewers’ third-turn receipts (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000, p. 24); that is, I collected the interviewers’ receptions of the children’s responses to interview questions. Interviewers had received no detailed guidance on how to respond to the children. Mainly, interviewers acknowledged children’s answers with ‘okay’ or by repeating the answer before moving to the next question. Some responses, such as assessments, claims of understanding, and reactions, stood out from this pattern. I decided to focus on instances in which interviewers claimed to understand. These claims occurred repeatedly when children had oriented to problems in getting the interviewer to understand their experiences in the past or during the interview. For example, interviewees pursued uptake of their emotional descriptions when the interviewer oriented to their tellings as information (Excerpt 2), provided accounts for their past actions (Excerpt 3), or complained about interview requirements (Excerpt 6). After noticing this pattern, I looked for different ways of claiming understanding (e.g., ‘Jag fattar/I get it’) but found
that interviewers only used ‘Jag förstår’ (I understand), ‘Då förstår jag’ (literally ‘Then understand I’), and ‘Det förstår jag’ (literally ‘That understand I’) to topicalize their understanding. The final analysis concentrates on 37 examples that include the word ‘understand’.

To examine the different functions of these claims, I transcribed the clips according to CA conventions (Jefferson, 2004; see http://ca-tutorials.lboro.ac.uk/notation.htm). Using audio-recorded interviews limited the data, since people may have used non-verbal tokens to communicate that they understood an experience (cf. Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). However, audio captures many embodied and verbal forms of experience display and recognition, including intonation, timing, smiley voice, extreme case formulations, response cries, laughter, crying, feelings talk, and aspiration (cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Weatherall & Stubbe, 2015). I analysed the clips with regards to their positions in sequence and turn and their composition in terms of grammar and lexical and non-verbal design (Schegloff, 2007).

The examples presented in the analysis show the interviewees orienting to a potential problem in the interviewer’s understanding of their situation. The data set includes four cases in which interviewers offered claims of understanding without interviewees previously having oriented to problems in understanding (e.g., Excerpt 5, line 51, see Appendix S1). Accordingly, such claims may not be limited to situations in which understanding has become an issue at stake, but their repeated occurrence after interviewees oriented to problems suggests that they are useful in this context. Because of word limits, the analysis focuses on this particular use. The transcripts are presented with original Swedish and idiomatic English translations. Extended excerpts with literal translations can be found in the Appendix S1.

**Analysis**

In the following analytic sections, we see interviewers using claims of understanding to (1) close a sequence in which interviewees orient to difficulties getting their experiences across to the interviewer, (2) affiliate with interviewees’ defensive responses about past actions and reactions, and (3) affiliate with interviewees’ possible complaints about the interview. By claiming to understand, the interviewers orient to a difference between their pursuit of information about specific experiences and their ability to understand the interviewees’ situation, thereby displaying awareness that their understanding has itself become an issue at stake.

**Gaining understanding: ‘I understand what you mean’**

In this section, we deal with situations in which interviewers have requested clarification of a specific aspect of the interviewees’ telling. In both cases used to exemplify this practice, the interviewees cooperate by providing answers but orient to problems in getting the interviewer to understand their experiences. By then claiming to understand what the interviewees mean, the interviewers communicate that they have reached a new understanding and close the topic.

Before Excerpt 1, the interviewee, a nine-year-old boy, has been asked ‘How does it feel to be with your mom?’ and answered ‘It feels safe’ (see Appendix S1). The interviewer elicits an account for this answer, thereby challenging the obvious relevance of feeling safe (lines 6–7):
By delaying his answer and starting with ‘ja/well,’ the interviewee projects a turn that may not fulfill the expectations established in the prior turn (lines 8–11; cf. Heritage, 2015; Lindström, 2009). After this, he contributes an answer that aligns with the question by describing his mom’s conduct (lines 12–13). The interviewer treats this as a valid answer by starting to take notes, but offers no verbal acknowledgement that would signal her reception of the information she asked for. The interviewee starts elaborating but shows and verbalizes difficulties continuing (lines 13–14). By saying that it is difficult to describe (lines 14–15), he orients to not being able to communicate his experiences to the interviewer. In overlap with his account, the interviewer claims that his previous answer was sufficient to make her understand. She can be heard as pre-empting his unfinished turn (line 15), thus prioritizing communicating shared understanding over eliciting additional information. Specifically, by claiming to understand what the interviewee ‘means’ (line 17), she implies a difference between what he says and what he is trying to convey (cf. Weatherall & Keevallik, 2016) and that she can do the interpretation. Accordingly, she orients to understanding as a matter that goes beyond getting access to further information that the interviewee may provide. The interviewee finishes his description, demonstrating the difficulty by vaguely repeating what he said before (line 18). Both participants then treat the topic as closed.

In the next excerpt, the claim of understanding occurs at a greater distance from the participants’ orientations to problems with the interviewer’s understanding of the interviewee’s experiences. Still, the interviewer uses the claim in a similar way – to close down talk related to the topic by communicating that she has gained a new understanding based on the interviewee’s telling. Before the interaction in the excerpt, there have been problems related to the prior question, ‘Did your mom and dad fight with each other?’ By answering ‘But dad started first’, the interviewee, a five-year-old boy, has resisted the question’s assumption that his mom and dad were equally involved in fighting (see
Appendix S1). After a repair sequence, the interviewer shows that she has understood this distinction by asking only about the dad’s actions (lines 39–40):

**Excerpt 2. 07:16, 5-year-old boy**

39 IR  
[Ja: vad gjo:rade han för  
Yes what kind of things  
nånting när han bråka=din pappa.  
did he do when he fought=your dad.  
(0.6)  
41 IE  
Tch. Han skrä:k.  
He screamed.  
42 IR  
Han skré:ck.  
He screamed.  
((writing))  
43 IE  
[eh Ha:n gjo:rade att: (.) min mamma  
He did so that my mom  
44 IE  
fick ingenting att gör.h=att hon  
didn't get to do nothing.h=that she  
ska bara sitta (i fångelse)=.ingenting.=Det  
will just sit (in prison)=nothing=It  
ser ut som ett fångelse!  
looks like a prison!  
45 IR  
A:, så han s- han börja me att det skrek=  
Yeah, so he s- he started with screaming=  
46 IE  
=å hon skulle sittta (0.5) nänstansch?  
=and she would sit somewhere?  
47 IR  
=A:, s  
Yeah,  
48 IE  
Men hon (0.8) hon fick ingen-  
But she she got noth-  
ingenting göra så det var som ett fångelse!=  
got to do nothing so it was like a prison!=  
49 IR  
=A hon fick inte göra nånting=Hon [satt=  
Yeah she got to do nothing=She [sat  
((writing))  
45 IE  
[Mm  
50 IR  
=hemma i ((rummet)),=  
at home in ((the room)),  
51 IE  
=A:,=  
Yeah,  
52 IE  
Men hon (0.8) hon fick ingen-  
But she she got noth-  
ingenting göra så det var som ett fångelse!=  
got to do nothing so it was like a prison!=  
53 IR  
=A hon fick inte göra nånting=Hon [satt=  
Yeah she got to do nothing=She [sat  
((writing))  
55 IE  
[Mm  
56 IR  
=hemma i ((rummet)),=  
at home in ((the room)),  
57 IE  
=A:,=  
Yeah,  
58 IR  
=A- å de var som ett fångelse för henne,=  
An- and it was like a prison to/for her  
((writing continues until the excerpt ends))  
59 IE  
=A.=  
Yeah.  
60 IR  
A:a:  
Yeah  
61 (0.2)  
62 IR  
.hhAa  
.hhYeah  
63 (0.3)  
64 IR  
Ja förstår hur du menar: då att det  
I understand how you mean then that it  
var illa för henne,  
was bad for her,
Between lines 42 and 53, there are differences between the interviewee’s delivery and the interviewer’s uptake. Whereas the interviewee provides an evaluative, emotional description – including the extreme case formulation ‘nothing’ (Pomerantz, 1986), the metaphor ‘prison’, and exclamatory intonation (lines 44–47) – the interviewer focuses on establishing the facts of what, where, and when (lines 43, 48–49). Specifically, the interviewer points out the location as an unclear element (line 49). The interviewee clarifies (line 50) but offers a contrastive elaboration (lines 52–53) in overlap with the interviewer’s receipt. This elaboration reiterates the evaluative elements in his previous telling. The interviewee can thereby be heard as pursuing acknowledgement of not only what happened but also how it was. This marks a shift in the interviewer’s project. She repeats the evaluative terms in a way that resembles the pitch of the interviewee (lines 54, 56, 58). The sigh-prefaced ‘yeah’ can also be heard as supporting the interviewee’s emotional stance by displaying an emotion evoked by his telling (line 62; cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). Accordingly, after initially prioritizing information collection over affiliation, the interviewer attends to the emotional aspects of the telling.

Instead of moving to the next question, the interviewer issues another turn composed of an understanding claim and an assessment (lines 64–65). The assessment makes explicit that the object of understanding is the mom’s bad situation. The interviewer uses the inference marker ‘then’ (line 64). This locates her understanding in time, conditional upon what has just been said. As in Excerpt 1, the interviewer specifies that the understood object is the interviewee’s intended meaning (line 64). This can be heard as an effort to make explicit her shift from focusing on the interviewee’s telling in terms of information, as displayed by her request for clarification (line 49). It is linked to the assessment ‘it was bad for her’, which demonstrates an independent interpretation of what the interviewee is trying to communicate – not limited to the facts to which he has provided access.

Although the excerpts show interviewees dealing with different problems – justifying a feeling and communicating not only what happened, but also how it was – both show them grappling with difficulties in making their experiences understandable. We see the interviewers moving from carrying out interview requirements by pointing out their lack of knowledge to affiliating by claiming to have gained enough information to understand what the interviewees mean. They can thereby be understood as managing the balancing act of treating children’s previous experiences as completely unknown while still being able to understand them: They ask clarifying questions but claim and show understanding of more than the information they access through the children’s tellings.

**Suggesting a shared moral universe: “Cause you got so mad’**

The second analytic section shows interviewers using claims of understanding after interviewees have provided accounts of their actions or reactions. Accounts are important in relation to shared understanding as participants may use them to forestall negative conclusions (Heritage, 1988). Thus, by providing accounts, interviewees can be heard as orienting to possible misinterpretations of their answers. This section shows interviewers responding to interviewees’ accounts in ways that establish themselves as able to correctly interpret the interviewees’ situations and therefore downplaying the need for accounts.
Excerpt 3 concerns the last question in a questionnaire about experiences of domestic violence. Just prior to the excerpt, the eight-year-old interviewee has said that she cannot cope with more questions and remarked that a question has already been asked. The interviewer has responded that there are only a few questions left. She asks if the interviewee’s mom has abused her, and the interviewee says ‘no’ (see Appendix S1). The interviewer then phrases the last questionnaire question (lines 21–22) in accordance with the interviewee’s previous descriptions of violence:

Excerpt 3. 08:52, 8-year-old girl

21 IR Va brukade du gö:ra när Erik’s
What did you usually do when Erik’s
22 pappa slög mamma eller skrek på mamma.
dad hit mom or screamed at mom.
23 0.7
24 IE Tsk=Ne:j ja bara stanna i
No I just stayed in
25 rummet men .h ja vill=
the room but I really want=
26 IR [Mm:
27 IE =gärna skri:ka på han också=
=scream at him too
28 IR =A:a:: de förstå:rar ja=
Yeah I understand that=
29 IE =>hn< >hn< >hn<
30 (2.0) ((writing))
31 IR För du blev så arg på honom,=
Cause you got so mad at him,=
32 IE =Mm: ja vill int ma- ingen
=Mm I don’t want ma-/on- No
33 familj ska skada!
=Family should ((get)) hurt
34 IR Nåj viss:t.
=No for sure.

The question invites an answer about actions (lines 21–22). Although the interviewee provides information about what she did – stayed in the room – she treats this as an insufficient answer: she begins by saying ‘no’, and the minimizing word ‘just’ implies a contrast between staying in the room and doing (line 24). She continues to contrast staying in the room with her wish to scream at Erik’s dad (lines 25, 27). Hereby, the interviewee treats her answer as needing an account. By communicating a wish to act differently, the interviewee specifically counterworks any interpretation that she stayed in the room because she wanted to (cf. Flinkfeldt, 2017).

The interviewer responds promptly with an affirmative receipt followed by a claim of understanding (line 28). Hereby, she endorses the interviewee’s stance without unpacking her understanding. This supportive response shifts from the interviewer’s information-eliciting position in lines 21–22. The interviewee provides an elaboration – a crying sound (line 29) impossible to represent adequately in transcription. It lacks aspiration particles and can therefore be heard as ‘doing crying’ rather than sobbing. In this context, ‘doing crying’ could be taken to mark the topic as relatively worse than other things they have been talking about. The interviewer treats the answer as relevant by taking notes (line 30). She then displays her understanding of the interviewee’s wish to scream as justified (line 31). Offering an account related to the interviewee’s feelings (‘Cause you got so mad’) assumes experiential closeness – that the interviewer can
interpret feelings that the interviewee has not described. Thereby, the interviewer prioritizes responding to the interviewee’s emotional display over the interview agenda of soliciting the interviewee’s views and experiences.

The interviewee confirms and again brings up her wish, this time related to a general rule about not hurting families (lines 32–33). She delivers this evaluation emphatically, and the interviewer’s agreement matches this emphasis (line 34). Thus, while the interviewee’s defensive response (lines 24–27) could be heard as anticipating a disaffiliative understanding of her actions during violent events, the interviewer and interviewee end up in agreement. However, it is unclear over what they agree – the interviewee initially treats staying in the room as the main assessable object and displays sadness, but the interviewer displays understanding of wishing to scream and being angry. The excerpt thereby showcases the potential dilemma related to showing understanding of something other than the information the interviewee has provided.

In Excerpt 4, the interviewee orients to the interviewer’s potential lack of understanding by offering an account that includes information he recently offered. Just prior to this question, the interviewer has asked if the interviewee’s dad has scared and hurt his mom. The interviewee, a ten-year-old boy, has answered yes to both questions and described his dad screaming, hitting, and wrestling with his mom (see Appendix S1). The interviewer then asks the interviewee if his dad has done something to his mom that has scared him (lines 21–22):

**Excerpt 4. 00:50, 10-year-old boy**

21 IR .h Har din pappa gjort något mot din mamma som gjort dej rådd.
   Has your dad done something to your mom that made you scared.
22 IE Jaa.
   Yes.
23 IR 'Aa:' Va gjorde han då?
   Yes What did he do then?
24 IE (.)
25 IR 'Aa:
   Yeah
26 IR Yes What did he do then?
27 IE Asså oftast när pappa brukar slå henne,
   Look most often when dad usually hits her,
28 IE eh så=vahetere, (.). Då brukarja va
   then what’s it called (.). Then I’m usually
29 IE ((swallows))
   ((swallows))
30 IR ganska <nära>,
   quite close,
31 IR Oke[j.
   Okay
32 IE [Oche då brukarja oftast bli ganska
   And then I usually most often get quite
33 IE <rådd>:,
   scared,
34 IR Aa,
   Yeah,
35 IE ((writing))
36 IR De förstår ja=De blir man.
   I understand that=That’s how one does
37 IR ((3.3))
38 IR Har han gjort de flera gånger.
   Has he done it several times.
As in Excerpt 3, the interviewer’s question (lines 21–22) could be answered according to the question’s constraints – something like ‘Yes, when he hits her’. However, the interviewee’s answer includes features of a dispreferred response – first, the interviewee just offers a marked ‘yes’, without providing examples (line 24). When the interviewer asks about actions (line 25), the answer is delayed with the attention marker ‘alltsa/look’ (Aijmer, 2007) and includes an account for becoming scared – being close to the violence (lines 28–29). There is a social norm against informing already knowing recipients (Stivers et al., 2011), so the interviewee can be heard as treating the interviewer as lacking cultural competence as he draws attention to, repeats, and explains this information (lines 27–29, 32–33). The interviewer responds to the interviewee’s account as new information with a receipt and by taking notes (lines 34–35). Then, with a claim of understanding and an assessment, she treats it as available to her as part of a general understanding about reactions (line 37). With the general assessment ‘One does’, his reaction is treated as normal, thereby as unnecessary to account for in relation to her as an understanding subject.

In this section, the interviewees contribute descriptions of their past experiences but answer defensively. By taking notes, the interviewers treat them as providing new information while they use claims of understanding to communicate affiliation. Specifically, by providing their own accounts or assessments, the interviewers show that they are already with the interviewees, sharing their understanding of the events. Accordingly, while their questions communicate lack of knowledge about the interviewees’ experiences, the claims and displays of understanding treat the answers as self-evident and disregard the need for accounts. They can thereby be heard as establishing a difference between asking and noting for the record, on one hand, and understanding as co-conversationalists, on the other.

**Supporting complaints: ‘I understand, it’s a lot’**

In the final section, we see how interviewers use claims of understanding after interviewees complain about the interview procedure. While the interviewees’ complaints highlight potential discrepancies in how the interviewer and interviewee understand the interview requirements – as justified or as too demanding – the interviewers disregard the existence of such discrepancies by siding with interviewees against the interview procedure.

Excerpt 5 is concerned with the difficulties of matching experiences to response options and starts after the nine-year-old interviewee has been asked if his mom has ever told him that something he did was bad. He has provided two examples: jumping from a high fence and getting mad at his sibling (see Appendix S1). The interviewer asks him to grade the experiences according to the questionnaire’s response options (lines 63–64):

**Excerpt 5. 16:09 boy 9 years**

63 IR .H Om du fär gradera da pären
   If you can grade then on
64  hår skalan=hh.
   this scale
65 IE De e [svårt att gradera ]=
   It is difficult to grade
66 IR [’Vicken tyckeru att de är]
   Which do you think it is
67 IE =den h[är gången.]
   this time.
The interviewee provides a negative assessment of the action the interviewer is requesting (‘It is difficult’; line 65, 67). Rather than outright refusing, the assessment communicates that he is cooperative with the interview activity but has problems granting this specific request. In overlap, the interviewer first offers what can be heard as a clarification (line 66). After the interviewee has made clear that the difficulty refers to fulfilling the request, not problems in understanding, the interviewer backs down by offering an understanding claim that affiliates with the interviewee’s position (line 68). The promptness communicates that the interviewer is with the interviewee—she does not have to revaluate (cf. Sacks, 1992II, 257). Thus, while her action of asking the interviewer to pick an alternative may suggest that she does not know that this request is too difficult, she treats his account as perfectly understandable. In addition, the interviewer strongly affiliates with the interviewee’s stance by offering an alternative interview practice that moves away from the questionnaire format (lines 70–71, 73–74).

In the final excerpt, the 17-year-old interviewee treats the interviewer as pushing for more information when she can be heard as making follow-up arrangements. Like the interviewer in Excerpt 5, this interviewer orients to already understanding what the interviewee is saying about the interview. Before the excerpt, the interview has been proceeding for over an hour and the interviewee has disclosed many experiences of abuse, several of which were news to the interviewer. The interviewer launches one of the last interview questions, preceded by the following scripted formulation: ‘Now I have asked you lots of things about what has happened in your home, but there may be important things that I haven’t asked about’ (see Appendix S1), after which the question follows:

Excerpt 6. 1:09, boy. 17 yrs.

22 IR Äre nånting som handlar om det
Is there anything/something concerning what
23 som hän- Hännt hemma hos dej
has hap- Happened at your home
24 som du vill berätta om,
you want to tell me about,
25 (2.5)
26 IE Inte va ja vet nu "i alla fallö", Not that I know now in any case,
27 IR Ähj.h Å kommere saker så
No; And should things come up then
28 tänker ja att du ha:r ju (.)
I’m thinking that you have y’know
29 liksom, De e ba att du- Vi kan höras av,
like, You can just- We can keep in touch,
By placing his lack of knowing in the present (‘Not that I know now’; line 26), the interviewee implies that there may be more to know. In what follows, the interviewer can be heard as acknowledging that there may be more experiences of violence, but that the interviewee will not be telling her about them now. She does this by using a hypothetical format (‘should things come up’, line 27) and suggesting a plan of action (‘keep in touch’, line 29). The interviewee offers a weak agreement (line 30). The interviewer pursues stronger agreement by suggesting a specific way of keeping in touch – the interviewee letting her know (line 34). In response, the interviewee accounts for not providing more information. With the contrastive ‘It’s probably more’ (line 35), the interviewee treats the interviewer as having misunderstood why he is not providing more information. His explanation makes explicit what his ‘now’ (line 26) refers to – having been sitting ‘for almost four hours’ (line 36). Accordingly, like the interviewee in the previous excerpt, this interviewee can be heard as making a complaint about the interviewer’s information-eliciting project.

By coming in early, agreeing, claiming understanding, and providing an assessment (lines 37–39), the interviewer ratifies the interviewee’s complaint about the interview. Specifically, she moves from the interviewee’s personal experiences (line 35) to the shared experience of having ‘been sitting really long’ (lines 38–39). She provides not just an upgraded agreement, but also a claim of understanding, showing that she is orienting to having been interpreted as lacking understanding. By both claiming to understand and demonstrating what she understands, the interviewer is affiliating with the interviewer’s experiences while also communicating that his account was uncalled for – she claims to already share his understanding about the interview.

While the interviewer is claiming and displaying unmediated access to his interview experiences, the epistemic hedging (‘I’m thinking’ and ‘maybe’; lines 39–40) makes explicit that she is doing interpretative work regarding the interviewee’s past
experiences. Thus, like the interviewers in Section 1, this interviewer orients to a difference between what she knows and what she understands regarding his past experiences. The interviewee provides confirmation (line 41) and, after another claim of understanding related to his past experiences (lines 42–43), the interviewer moves to informing the interviewee about future arrangements, thereby pre-empting him from elaborating (data not shown).

In these last two excerpts, interviewees offer accounts for why they are not complying with some interview requirement. The accounts assess the interviewers’ previous actions as difficult or burdensome and can be taken as complaints. By having carried out these requirements, the interviewer has taken the position of not knowing that the interview requirements are problematic for these particular interviewees. However, in their responses to the interviewees’ complaints, the interviewers orient to the interview experiences as sharable—the lack of understanding is thereby ascribed to the questionnaire.

To sum up, the analysis has identified three areas in which the interviewers use claims of understanding to counterwork an interpretation that they do not understand the interviewees’ experiences. In the first section, interviewers used claims to close sequences in which the interviewees had oriented to problems in getting their experiences across to the interviewers. The claims of understanding were used to indicate gained understanding, specifically related to a shift from a focus on elicitation of particular information to a general understanding of what the interviewee was trying to communicate. In the second section, the interviewees provided accounts for their answers, thereby orienting to a potential misunderstanding of the information they provided. By claiming to understand and displaying their understanding in accounts or assessments, the interviewers showed that they exist in the same moral universe, even though they did not know specific details of the children’s experiences. In the third section, the interviewers used claims of understanding after interviewees had issued complaints about the interviewers’ actions. These claims allowed interviewers to affiliate with interviewees by treating their complaints as understandable and by distancing themselves from the interview procedure. Although the interviewers differed in whether they claimed to have gained understanding or claimed to already occupy a shared position, all sections show the interview participants managing a tension between interviewers carrying out interview requirements, which do not allow them to assume knowledge of the interviewees’ specific experiences, and being persons who can interpret the interviewees’ situations.

This particular way of using claims of understanding does more than just endorse interviewees’ stances towards their experiences. Although claims of understanding could potentially provide affiliation free from evaluation, these interviewers provide assessments, accounts, or pre-emptions of further information. Therefore, when the interviewers explicitly verbalize understanding, they can be heard to orient to the interviewees’ prior turn as communicating a stance not only towards their experiences of the past or the interview, but also towards the interviewers as understanding persons. By claiming understanding, interviewers show that they have heard that their ability to understand has itself become an issue at stake.

Discussion

By examining in detail the work of interviewers’ claims of understanding, this article demonstrates how interviewers carry out the interview requirement of showing that they
lack knowledge about children’s specific abilities, feelings, reactions, and situations while also using claims and displays of understanding to attend to the children’s experiences as fundamentally sharable. These findings contribute to two areas of research: the broad field of studies on interviewing child victims and the growing body of research on how people manage the intersubjectivity of experience recognition.

The main contribution of the study is showing how the interviewers, by claiming to understand, orient to a difference between accessing information about and understanding interviewees’ experiences. In most cases, interviewers display sensitivity to ownership of experience (cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Heritage & Raymond, 2005); for example, the interviewer in Excerpt 6 assumes full access to the interview situation but hedges her access to the interviewee’s past experiences. In addition, interviewers treat understanding as something that does not necessarily need to be based on access to the information they have asked about. The interview format requires the interviewer to ask detailed question about experiences that they, as competent members, may be expected to draw conclusions about – why it feels safe to be with one’s mom or that a dad hitting and pushing a mom is frightening. By using an action focus to study such interview practices, CA and DP studies offer natural experiments of what happens when people are asked to disregard both cultural competence and the specificities of the particular other they are talking to (cf. Garfinkel, 1967, p. 47; Sacks, 1992II, 252f; Sacks et al., 1974; Wilkinson, 2011).

As in studies by Jol and Stommel (2016) and Childs and Walsh (2017), we see interviewers following the institutional requirement to avoid assuming knowledge and children treating this lack of assumption as problematic. Whereas the interviewers in Childs and Walsh’s (2017) study mitigated such interviewer behaviour by relating it to their own deficiencies – such as problems with hearing – the current study shows interviewers orienting to their pursuit of specific information as different from their ability to draw conclusions about the interviewees’ situations. Specifically, interviewers claim to be able to understand what children mean even though this meaning may not have been verbalized (Section 1), and they treat the children’s reactions (Section 2) and complaints (Section 3) as self-evident even though the interviewers’ previous actions did not take them for granted. The interviewers thereby orient to understanding as a matter that goes beyond their knowledge of particular details of the children’s experiences. Their claims of understanding do not do this work in isolation, but they highlight to the interviewees that the interviewers’ responses are concerned with intersubjectivity.

This finding indicates that current recommendations in forensic psychology may need better grounding in the details of what interview participants do. Current recommendations advise that interviewers only support information they can access directly, for example, by repeating (or ‘echoing’) what children have said or claiming to understand the interview experience but not past experiences (Hershkowitz et al., 2014). In the current analysis, we see that if support only addressed what is directly accessible to interviewers, it would miss responding to what children are doing: orienting to interviewers’ previous actions as problematic. The existence of questions that indicate a lack of understanding is probably an inescapable part of interviewing – in the analysed excerpts, we see children providing valuable information even in defensive responses (e.g., Excerpt 3). However, if interviewers fail to deal with children’s actions, their responses risk coming off as scripted, not supportive. A challenge in providing support in the highly constrained interview environment is, thus, that affiliative actions are difficult to plan – they need to be closely fitted to participants’ actions and stance.
Regarding the interactional function of claims of understanding, the current findings differ from those of Weatherall and Keevallik (2016) by showing claims of understanding following, rather than preceding, actions that suggest lack of understanding. However, in both studies, a central function of the claims of understanding seems to be to distinguish one’s stance from potentially disaffiliative actions. This is in line with what Weatherall and Keevallik (2016) suggest – that claiming understanding is a way to communicate general pro-socialness in interactional contexts characterized by misalignment or disaffiliation. In the setting of investigative interviews, suggesting a distinction between the interviewer as an understanding subject and the strict interview procedure may be one way of managing what could otherwise come off as inattentive, uncaring, or even hostile questions. Whether this holds for other contexts and works with resources other than claims of understanding are questions worth exploring further.

A second contribution of the study is its demonstration of an interview practice that differs from those identified in the few studies of interviewer responses. While Antaki et al. (2015) show police interviewers closely adhering to the interview agenda, the current study shows interviewers moving from strict information gathering to adjusting interview procedure and both claiming and demonstrating understanding of past experiences. These differences likely boil down to different interview priorities when generating information: Forensic interviews need to produce information valid in court, while social welfare investigations should provide information about how to protect and support children. In addition, the interviewer and child have a relationship that goes beyond collecting information about past abuse. Taken together, the two articles indicate how these institutional differences are visible in the details of talk. The current article highlights the importance of not simply transferring findings and recommendations on how to talk to children from a forensic to a social work setting – social welfare investigations need to be studied in their own right.

Finally, by examining claims of understanding in terms of experience recognition, the current study stresses the utility of CA and DP for examining intersubjectivity related to people’s subjective orientation towards events. Although CA studies have a long history of discussing experience (Sacks, 1992I, p. 119; II, p. 251), questions related to understanding the personal experiences of others have been asked mainly in relation to methods that instruct researchers to imagine themselves in the studied persons’ situations (perhaps most prominent in the verstehen approaches of hermeneutics or phenomenology; e.g., Smith, 2004). In contrast, this study examines sequential operations of stance and affiliation, an approach that enables researchers to demonstrate how participants make available and offer recognition of experience in naturally occurring organized activities.

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References


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### Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** Excerpts with literal translation.