



Article

Challenges in recognizing and facilitating disclosures of intimate partner violence in customer service calls about maintenance support

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Abstract

Separated parents in Sweden need to sort out child maintenance themselves unless there are 'special reasons', such as experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), in which case the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) may function as an intermediary. In such cases, the parent must disclose their experiences for institutional assessment. This study uses conversation analysis (CA) to examine 132 phone calls between parents and SSIA officers, examining how parental conflict and possible violence is brought up and responded to. The analysis shows how parents describe cooperative problems in non-specific terms, incrementally adding information that makes possible violence inferentially available, rendering it difficult for case officers to distinguish IPV from post-separation conflicts. Case officers typically respond minimally and do not encourage further tellings, which means that IPV may go unnoticed. The study highlights the need for training in how to recognize possible IPV and how to facilitate such disclosures.

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Keywords

Child maintenance, conversation analysis (CA), disclosures, intimate partner violence (IPV), membership categorization analysis (MCA)

Introduction

This article investigates how clients who have had a welfare benefit withdrawn work to object to the decision and establish grounds for why their case should be treated differently. Specifically, the study concerns post-separation child maintenance where parents have relied on a government agency to mediate payments, but have received a decision according to which they should instead deal directly with each other. To object to the changed conditions in terms of resisting contact with the other parent, the client needs to manage the normative constraints generally associated with resisting an institutional decision (e.g. Ekström et al., 2013) while also navigating the delicacies of risking being seen as an uncooperative parent. This is crucial in instances where the parent has experienced intimate partner violence (IPV), making direct contact unsuitable, in which case the parent needs to convincingly establish that this is the case (cf., Tegler, Fernqvist and Flinkfeldt, 2022).

IPV is a pervasive, gendered problem and less than 40% of women experiencing IPV seek help, rendering institutional interventions difficult (United Nations, 2015). It is widely known that disclosing experiences of IPV can be difficult and abused victims may hide, normalize or minimize what has happened (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1999; Liang et al., 2005). Talking about IPV can evoke feelings of shame, self-blame, or fear, and IPV is often considered a private matter not to be shared with outsiders (e.g. Kennedy et al., 2021). In addition, negative reactions to previous tellings may discourage further disclosures (Kennedy et al., 2021). The question of how to facilitate disclosures of IPV has thus been raised in many countries, as organizations across the public sector increasingly aim to incorporate routine screenings (Dagher et al., 2014). To date, however, little is known about how disclosures of IPV are organized in different settings and more knowledge is needed about how professionals can recognize and facilitate such disclosures (Anderzen-Carlsson et al., 2018). This paper aims to contribute to this literature by examining how professionals and clients talk about possible violence in a setting where IPV has only recently become a focus, namely social insurance administration in Sweden.

Although Sweden is commonly seen as one of the world's most gender equal countries, about 25% of all women report experiences of abuse (Frenzel, 2014). In line with the Swedish government's (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2016) strategies to stop gendered violence, public authorities have developed routines for professionals to facilitate and deal with such disclosures, for instance in maternity care (Anderzen-Carlsson et al., 2018) and social services (Nybom, 2014). In addition to routinely asking some client groups about violence, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) has also started *assessing* IPV following a reform of maintenance regulations in 2016. Under the new regulations, separated parents to a larger extent need to cooperate and manage maintenance transactions themselves – only if there are 'special reasons' such as experiences of IPV can the SSIA maintain their previous function as an intermediary, in which case the

parents can avoid contact. Research has suggested that the assessment criteria of ‘special reasons’ have been vague and that the reform has reactualized violence and increased the risk of particularly financial abuse (Fernqvist and S  pulchre, 2022; Fernqvist, Flinkfeldt & Tegler, submitted). Maintenance transactions can open up for post-separation revictimization and threats, and by delaying or withholding payments, liable parents can maintain power (Elizabeth et al., 2012; Natalier, 2018). It is therefore important that SSIA officers recognize descriptions that may be implicative of violence and work to facilitate such disclosures. By analyzing phone calls between case officers and clients who object to dealings with the other parent, the current study contributes knowledge on the difficulties associated with this.

A conversation analytic approach

Research in public administration has highlighted institutional encounters as central for the realization of policy (Bruhn and Ekstr  m, 2017; Lipsky, 1980), arguing that ‘studies of formal policies can only [provide] a partial understanding of what policy looks like in practice’ (Caswell, 2020: 24). This renders discursive approaches to institutional interaction important for understanding policy change since it is ‘in the discursive realm that the politics of welfare reform are given meaning and effect’ (Marston, 2008: 368). Conversation analysis (CA) is an analytic approach used to investigate the social organization of interaction. It is increasingly applied to bureaucratic encounters to provide insight into how welfare professionals manage interactional work tasks and how clients and professionals coordinate their actions and work to achieve mutual understanding (Flinkfeldt et al., 2022). CA involves close empirical study of naturally occurring interaction and can thus generate insights of high relevance for understanding the practical implications of policy as well as developing communication training for professionals (e.g. Stokoe, 2014). The approach is also closely related to membership categorization analysis (MCA), which studies categories ‘in the activities in which they’re employed’ (Sacks, 1995: 27) in interaction. This enables an understanding of the local import of categorization practices and how categories can be invoked to attribute responsibility (e.g. Stokoe, 2003).

In his early lectures on CA and MCA, Sacks (1995: 113) discusses the machinery through which we as social beings categorize events or people, using an example where a man (B) calls a social agency, describing something that has happened between him and his wife:

- B:** When she stepped between me and the child, I went to move her out of the way. And then about that time her sister had called the police.
(. . .)
- A:** Didn’t you smack her one?
- B:** No.
- A:** You’re not telling me the story, Mr B.

Sacks's point is that although the social worker (A) has never talked to B before and has only heard part of his account, he is able to infer from B's description that this might be a case of IPV. This highlights how descriptions that do not name violence may nevertheless be recognizable as such by drawing on members' cultural knowledge about behavior that may be bound to certain membership categories and the rights and obligations incumbents of one category (e.g. father) has to incumbents of another (e.g. child).

A handful of CA studies have examined how violence is disclosed and treated in institutional interaction. While analyses of custody disputes where the father has been convicted of IPV have shown how mothers and their attorneys work to emphasize the impact of violence as part of claiming child custody (Ingrids, 2014), investigations of other settings have found that IPV victims use similarly vague descriptions as in Sacks's example. A study of calls to a victim support agency found that disclosures of IPV rarely involve explicit references, showing troubles with formulating experiences of violence even in a setting where victimhood may be presumed (Tennent and Weatherall, 2019). Instead, disclosures tend to be built by invoking categories of people (e.g. ex-partner) and places (e.g. jail) to induce joint understanding that IPV might be an issue even where this is not spelled out (Tennent and Weatherall, 2019). Similarly, Rober et al. (2006) show how categorizations of events (using words like violence or abuse) are avoided in family therapy sessions, and that descriptive action words (e.g. shove) or invocations of weapons (e.g. fist) or emotions (e.g. angry) are favored when talking about violence. Similarly, disputants in divorce mediation have been found to use 'indirect and tentative constructions in order to constitute violence as an interactionally delicate topic and/or to test whether full disclosure of what has happened to them is possible', which suggests that vague or minimized allegations may refer to severe incidents (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1999: 174).

This line of work has also highlighted how professionals facilitate or respond to disclosures of violence, finding that talk about such experiences is often discouraged or minimized. For instance, Greatbatch and Dingwall (1999) show how professionals in divorce mediation ignore or downgrade reports of violence. While this might be partly explained by a strive to not take sides (cf., Stokoe, 2013), it is perhaps more surprising that also workers at a victim support helpline refrain from affiliative responses or advice, responding minimally with a focus on progressing service (Tennent and Weatherall, 2019). Although more research is needed to better understand the variation in professional responses across settings, it likely relates to the institutional business that participants are involved in and the different stakes associated with it (Tennent and Weatherall, 2019: 285). By investigating how parents raise parental conflict and possible IPV to resist an institutional decision and how case officers respond, the current study contributes to this literature.

Data and analytic procedure

The data consist of audio-recorded phone calls from separated parents to the SSIA. Recordings were made in 2016–2017, which coincides with the maintenance reform. At this time, letters were sent to parents receiving maintenance support from the SSIA, informing them that they would now need to handle maintenance transfers themselves. Upon receiving such letters, many parents called the SSIA customer service to ask

questions or object to being forced to deal with the other parent (Tegler, Fernqvist & Flinkfeldt, 2022). At the time of data collection, guidelines for how to facilitate disclosures of violence had not yet been developed and case officers had little or no training regarding IPV (Fernqvist, 2020). Their task was to explain regulations and refer possible cases of IPV to the back office for further investigation. Even though parents did not have to provide any kind of evidence of IPV at this point, they needed to disclose their experiences to an officer for the case to be transferred.

Following ethical approval, written informed consent was obtained from SSIA call-takers prior to making recordings, while callers were given information through a pre-recorded message and were encouraged to tell the call-taker if they did not wish to participate (Flinkfeldt & Näsman, 2019). Recordings have been stored securely and all extracts have been anonymized. We listened to all recorded calls (649 calls, about 55 hours), singling out those that brought up problems in the parents' relationship (ranging from disagreements to IPV), resulting in 132 calls (~17 hours) that were transcribed verbatim. Most of these were from resident parents ($n=85$) who were mothers ($n=75$). Segments where conflict or possible violence was raised were transcribed using Jeffersonian notation, which includes linguistic and interactional details such as emphasis, pitch, intonation, breathiness, laughter, crying, overlaps and timed silences (Hepburn and Bolden, 2014). These were analyzed using CA (Sidnell and Stivers, 2014), examining how possibly violence-implicative talk was delivered and responded to.

Analysis

The analysis is laid out in three parts. First, we show how callers resist the changed maintenance conditions by raising various relationship problems in vague terms, and how call-takers treat this as non-indicative of IPV. Next, we show how such vague accounts can develop into explicit claims of abuse. Finally, we examine a deviant case in which the call-taker responds to the caller's generally phrased objections as making further IPV-related inquiry relevant, but nevertheless design their question in a way that may discourage further disclosure of such experiences.

1. Callers' accounts of general contact difficulties are treated as non-implicative of violence

The callers (C) in our data typically call to object against the changes to their maintenance benefit, that is that they will need to administer maintenance directly with the other parent, rather than using the SSIA as an intermediary. In their accounts, they tend to describe their situation in terms of problematic contacts or lack of contact altogether, but without delving into the reasons for this or explicitly invoking violence. Distinguishing possible IPV from post-separation conflicts can therefore be challenging for call-takers (cf., Fernqvist and S epulchre, 2022). In this section, we show what callers' 'vague' accounts may look like and how case officers respond to them by encouraging parental contact, thus treating them as unrelated to IPV.

In the first extract, C accounts for her request to avoid further contact with the other parent by depicting him as unreasonable, invoking his refusal to pay and previous experiences of such contact:

Extract 1 (ISSICS1834, 0:38 – 3:13)

- 01 C .hhh ↑↑~Fö ja har haft ensam vårdnad i ett
 .hhh ↑↑~Because I've had single custody for one
 02 å ett halvt år, å vi har inte pratat me
 and a half year, and we haven't talked to
 03 varann ~å barnen har inte sett honom på
 each other ~and the children haven't seen him in
 04 den tiden=å .shih å han har hela tiden
 that time=and .shih and he has always
 05 hävdad att han vill inte beta:la för han
 claimed that he doesn't want to pa:y because he
 06 tror att ja sitter å skär i- .hh (.) #skär
 thinks that I'm sitting and cutting i- .hh (.) #cutting
 07 i: guld me (0.5) smörkniv ungefär#~
gold with (0.5) a butter knife pretty much#~
 08 (0.5)
 09 CT °Åkejç°
 °Okayç°
 (11sec excluded)
 19 C ↑~Å ja- Ja kan inte prata me honom, De
 ↑~And I- I can't talk to him, It's
 20 gå:r inte, Vi kan inte släppa in en- en
 not possible, We can't let in a- a- a
 21 #lilltå i familjen här.#~ .shih
 #little toe into the family here.#~ .shih
 22 CT [Nä:]
 No:
 23 C [~Från] (0.3) de hållet.~
 ~From (0.3) that way.~
 24 CT °Nä, [Åkej,°]
 °No, Okay,°
 (1min 46sec excluded)
 25 CT Att ni behöver liksom inte ha nån kontakt
 That you don't need to like have any contact
 26 me varandra, öh: För han kan ju swisha ö-
 with each other, uh: Because you know he can swish uh-
 27 pengar över till ditt konto via ditt
 money to your account via your
 28 telefonnummer exempelvis,
 phone number for example,

C incrementally adds more information supporting her stance opposing the SSIA's decision: she has sole custody and neither she nor the children have had any recent contact with the father, thus depicting him as non-engaged in core activities bound to fathers as

a category (lines 1–4). She adds that the father has ‘always claimed’ (lines 4–5) that he does not want to pay, using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that works up the situation as non-temporary and stemming from his irresponsibility. The claim that he does not *want* to provide for the children makes the activity of non-provision moral rather than practical, placing blame on the father (cf., Flinkfeldt, 2017). C then formulates the father’s beliefs: that she is ‘cutting gold with (0.5) a butter knife’ (lines 6–7), using a metaphor that by its extremity makes available the understanding that the situation is in fact the opposite, further contributing to depicting the father as unreasonable (cf., Edwards, 2000).

CT responds with a free-standing token, ‘°Okay_i°’, produced with slight final pitch rise, which encourages C to continue (Lindström, 2017). C specifies with emphasis that it is ‘not possible’ to talk to the father (line 20), thus suggesting that the situation might be more serious. By choosing the word ‘can’t’, this is treated as something imposed on her, thus displaying inability rather than unwillingness to comply with the institutional decision (cf., Flinkfeldt, 2017). She then adds that they cannot ‘let in a little toe’ (lines 20–21). This might be understood as a possible proverbial mistake, as it could either be heard as a ‘little finger’ (as in the saying ‘give him a little finger and he’ll take the whole hand’) or as ‘getting a foot in the door’, both of which constitute the first half of a proverb depicting dire consequences of seemingly small changes. Furthermore, the use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ and the category ‘family’ invokes prospective harm to the whole family, not just to her. While this works to suggest that the situation may be more severe than just disagreements over maintenance, it also works up C’s identity as a responsible mother working to protect the children from the other parent, without spelling out how his involvement could be harmful or whether it could be understood as having to do with violence.

Throughout the extract, C hearably cries, displaying being upset about possible contact with the father. While this does not entail a history of violence, it contributes to the understanding that the issue is serious for C. As previous research has shown, displays of emotion in institutional settings can work to introduce a problem in an implicit way that leaves it to the professional party to pursue the matter if deemed institutionally relevant (Potter and Hepburn, 2003). This also aligns with previous IPV research that has found that implicit problem presentations can be used to test whether disclosure of IPV is institutionally possible and relevant (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1999).

In sum, C draws on a range of resources to describe the situation as problematic and possibly beyond normal post-separation conflict, which could suggest to CT that it might be relevant to pursue more details or forward C’s claim to special SSIA investigators of possible partner violence cases. However, CT instead encourages C to go along with the decision by saying that C and her ex-partner ‘don’t need to like have any contact’ but that the father can transfer the money to her bank account or phone via the bank transfer service Swish (lines 25–28). By such means, CT not only treats C’s account as non-indicative of IPV (by not pursuing the matter), but also treats further contact as unproblematic, not recognizing money transfers as a possible medium for exerting abuse. C’s resistance to the decision letter is not hearably documented, and the possibility of C’s case being checked for whether it might constitute a ‘special reason’ warranting exception from the new regulation, is not mentioned.

The context in extract 2 is similar, as C has called in response to the SSIA’s decision letter, and objects to the decision by describing her former partner’s actions:

Extract 2 (ISSICS2020, 0:49 – 1:16)

- 01 C Ne:j han bara brå:kar så de går ju inte
No: he only fi:ghts so it is not possible you know
- 02 att komma överens me honom.
to come to an agreement with him.
- 03 (1.0)
- 04 C Om ni lägger liksom beslut i hans
If you kind of put the decision in his
- 05 händer så kommer han aldrig betala
hands he will never pay
- 06 ens en slant (hehe).HH Han pratar ju
even a penny (hehe).HH You know he doesn't
- 07 inte me sin so:n,
speak to his so:n,
- 08 CT Nej [men
No but
- 09 C [Bara för att
Just because
- 10 CT Ja, (0.5) har du nån kontakt me honom,
Well (0.5) do you have any contact with him,
- 11 C Aldrig
Never
- 12 CT Nä åkej. .Hh men om vi förmedlar
No okay. .Hh but if we give
- 13 ditt kontonummer till honom å han
your bank account to him and he
- 14 sätter in pengar till dej, skulle de:
deposits the money to you, would thā:t
- 15 va åkej.
be okay.

Similar to the previous extract, C describes the father's actions and attitude as the reasons for her resisting the institutional decision: he 'only fights/quarrels' and it 'is not possible to come to an agreement with him' (lines 1–2), suggesting that she has tried but failed, and is thus not to blame for their inability to comply with the decision. Upon receiving no uptake from CT in line 3, C adds that if the father will be allowed to choose (as the SSIA's decision entails), he will 'never pay even one penny'. Like in the prior extract, the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) builds a description of the father as unreasonable and at odds with how parents should act, which is further supported by the claim that he never speaks to his son (lines 6–7). By means of listing, activities and predicates are presented as examples drawn from a wider range of matters that place him outside of the category 'responsible fathers' (cf., Stokoe, 2003), which makes available the possibility that he might also have done other things excluding him from that category.

Similarly to the previous extract, this could warrant further questions from CT to exclude the possibility of abuse in the family. However, in line 8, CT starts what looks like an objection ('No but'), and then orients to current contact as the main issue as she asks if C has 'any contact with him' (line 10). In response to C's extreme case formulation 'Never' – which might be heard as indicating both non-contact and a stance toward having contact – CT treats the problem as practical (and as unrelated to possible IPV) by suggesting a way to put them in contact with each other.

The next extract is also from the beginning of a call, where the mother describes the content of the decision letter to CT:

Extract 3a (ISSICS1886, 0:25 – 2:03)

- 01 C °Precis° eh och <de står där att eh:>
°Exactly° uh and <it says there that uh:>
- 02 (0.5) °min° dotters <pappa å ja:g ska
(0.5) °my° daughter's dad and I will
- 03 ta hand om de där själva> och att de
take care of that ourselves> and that it
- 04 inte ska gå genom e:r längre.
will not go through you anymore.
- 05 (0.4)
- 06 CT A:¿
Yeah:¿
- 07 (1.1)
- 08 C °#Men ja tycker inte de#°
°#But I don't think that#°
- 09 (1.1)
- 10 CT Åke:j, °nu ska vi se°
Okay: °now let's see°
- 11 (2.6) ((typing sounds))
- 12 CT Eh: men då ska vi se va:, va:, e
Uh: let's see wha:t, wha:t, is
- 13 anledningen att du inte vill de då,
the reason for you not wanting this then,
- 14 (1.8)
- 14 C Eh: anledningen till att ja inte vill
Uh: the reason for not wanting
- 15 de de e att eh:: .hhh #ä# när han å
it that is that uh: .hhh #uh# when he and
- 16 jag ska ha sådan kontakt #eh: så
I are to have such contact #uh: then
- 17 fungerar de oftast inte#
it ususally doesn't work#
- 18 (0.7)
- 19 CT Åke:j¿
Oka:y¿

- 20 (1.4)
- 21 CT Äm
Um
- 22 (2.8) ((typing sounds))
- 23 C Asså han å ja: ska ha så lite
Well he and I: should have as little
- 24 kontakt som möjligt, Då blir de bäst.
contact as possible, That's the best.
- 25 (0.4)
- 26 CT ɛÄ(h)ke:jɛ
ɛOk(h)a:yɛ
- 27 (0.9) ((typing sounds))
- 28 CT °Uhm°
- 29 (44.8) ((typing sounds))
- 30 CT För de e ju de att att har man skött
Because it's you know if one has managed
- 31 betalningen till oss så så bör man ju
the payment to us then then one should you know
- 32 kunna betala till den andra
be able to to pay to the other
- 33 föräldern,
parent,

After describing the contents of the letter, C objects by formulating her stance toward the matter: 'But I don't think that' (line 8). This is phrased as an opinion rather than an objective problem restricting compliance in an institutionally relevant way, and C does not account for her stance. CT receives the objection with 'Oka:y', conveying an agnostic stance rather than validating C's experience (Lindström, 2017), and begins to hearably write something down, thus treating C's objection as relevant for the institutional decision (Monteiro, 2016). However, she interrupts the writing to ask why C does not 'want' that (lines 12–13), treating the objection as accountable (cf., Flinkfeldt, 2017).

There is an 1.8 second gap and when finally responding in line 14, C recycles part of the question, which is something interactants tend to do when taking an opposing stance, asserting social entitlement to the matter (Heritage and Raymond, 2012). Prior to the account, there is further hedging (an elongated 'uh', an inbreath, and another 'uh' in line 15). While this might indicate trouble, the account itself ('when he and I are to have such contact then it usually doesn't work') is general in orientation and mitigated by 'usually' (i.e. their contact is depicted as difficult, but with some exceptions). In addition, C does not assign blame to either party, which suggests that it may be a mutual conflict. In other words, C does not indicate that she has been subjected to abuse and CT consequently orients to the account as insufficient: the response is delayed, the 'Oka:y' (line 19) has a slight upwards ('questioning') intonation, and she delays writing down C's explanation. Instead there is a 1.4 second silence and a stand-alone 'uhm' in line 21 (suggesting trouble, possibly related to documentation) before CT finally in line 22 begins writing. C then adds: 'He and I should have as little contact as

possible, that's the best' (lines 23–24). Again, this account is general in that it does not specify why (or who is responsible), and is not in itself violence-implicative. This means that it is not institutionally sufficient to change the SSIA's decision. CT's responsive '£O(h)ka:y£' in line 26 receives the information and she continues writing, but at the same time treats the account as inapposite with interpolated laughter (cf., Potter and Hepburn, 2010).

Finally, CT formulates the condition on which the decision relies: 'Because you know the thing is that if one has managed payment to us one should be able to pay to the other parent' (lines 30–33). It is a generalized account (using third-person 'one'/'you') but the turn-initial 'because' frames it as responsive to the information that C has provided while 'ju' ('you know') makes the account hearable as oppositional to the implicit request that the SSIA should continue to function as an intermediary between the parents (cf., Heinemann et al., 2011). Since exceptions are made based on 'special reasons' such as IPV, CT here does not treat C's description of her situation as implicative of such issues.

In sum, callers that object to the SSIA's decision typically account for this by invoking problems relating to contacts with the other parent. As this section has shown, such accounts range from general objections that do not unpack problematic experiences or assign blame, to invocations of the other parent's unreasonable behavior and unwillingness to cooperate, that render them responsible for the non-compliance. The examined extracts do not involve explicit orientations to violence, but it could be argued that the problems raised would warrant further inquiries by call-takers to ensure that IPV is not an issue in these cases. However, we have seen that call-takers typically do not pursue this, but instead tend to encourage contact or account for why the parents should solve the matter themselves. In the next section, we show how this may be problematic, as vague descriptions of relational problems may in fact relate to IPV.

2. Accounts of general contact problems can develop into explicit claims of abuse

In our corpus of 132 calls there are only 11 instances where callers clearly describe their former partners' actions *as* abuse. Extract 3b continues from extract 3a (about 2 minutes later), where the mother has objected to the SSIA's decision without invoking violence and CT has documented her claims. The extract starts with CT initiating closing in line 1, which C interrupts to question why the SSIA would not grant her request:

Extract 3b (ISSICS1886, 4:14 – 5:20)

- | | | |
|----|----|--|
| 01 | CT | £Jättebra [>men då<£
£Great [>but then<£ |
| 02 | C | [Va: e
Wha:t is |
| 03 | CT | [>A¿<
[>Yea¿< |
| 04 | C | [Va skulle <u>anledningen</u> vara att ni
What would the <u>reason</u> be for you |
| 05 | | beslutar att (0.3) att de <u>inte</u> ska
to decide (0.3) that it will <u>not</u> |

- 06 gå (0.5) #via er# (0.3)>asså< om ja:
go (0.5) #through you# (0.3)>like< if I:
- 07 säger att ja vill att de ska gå via er
say that I want it to go through you
- 08 varför skulle de inte göra de då,
why would it not then,
- 09 (0.8)
- 10 CT De e de att att kan han sköta
It's that that if he can manage
- 11 betalningen så kan han ju sköta te
the payment he can you know manage it to
- 12 dej. (0.6) De ska ju va
you. (0.6) There should you know be
- 13 sä:rskilda skäl till att de inte sk-
spe:cial reasons for it no:t to-
- 14 till att de skulle fortsätta gå
that it would continue to go
- 15 via oss.
through us.
- 16 (1.2)
- 17 C Åkej men då har ja särskilda
Okay but then I have special
- 18 skä:l #i såna fall# för han har
reasons #in that case# because he has
- 19 ho:tat mej förut så ja har
threatened me before and I have
- 20 poli:sanmält honom å de har också
reported him to the police and it has also
- 21 varit i situationer när pengar har
been in situations where money has
- 22 vart inblandade.
been involved.
- 23 (0.4)
- 24 CT Åke:j.
Oka:y.
- 25 (1.7)
- 26 CT °Uh:::m°
- 27 (4.4) ((writing sounds))
- 28 CT? .Hhh
- 29 (2.6) ((writing sounds))
- 30 CT Men då [ska vi:
But then we will
- 31 C [Liksom om de inte räcker me att
Like if it's not enough that

- 32 jag säger att jag inte vill de då (.)
I say that I don't want that then (.)
- 33 då måste jag #framföra varför i
then I need to #present why in
- 34 sådana fall#=
that case#=
- 35 CT =>Ja men precis< för de e de e ju att
=>Yes well exactly< because it's it's you know that
- 36 man måste ha särskilda [skäl=
one must have special reasons=
- 37 C [Hh
- 38 CT =>elle ja< asså, men >ja skriver in<
=>or yeah< well, but >I write it in<
- 39 de: (0.4) att att ä (0.4) att de:
the: (0.4) that that uh (0.4) that there have
- 40 #ä:# mm. föregått hot å att du vi- ha
#uh:# mm. transpired threats and that you have
- 41 polisanmält honom vid tillfälle
reported him to the police at times

By asking about the reason for deciding in opposition to her wishes, C treats CT's reception of her previous request as indicating that the account 'I want it to go through you' (line 7) is insufficient for warranting such a decision. CT responds by specifying that there must be 'special reasons' for the SSIA to continue to function as an intermediary (lines 12–15). CT thus invokes a rule, using institutional terminology without connecting this specifically to C's case, thereby building C's situation as potentially incongruent with the rule and downplaying the institutional relevance of C's situation. In addition, CT uses 'ju' ('you know'; line 12), making CT's response hearable as contrastive to what C has told her (cf., Heinemann et al., 2011).

At this point, C discloses previous experiences of violence: that her former partner has threatened her and she has reported him to the police (lines 18–20). She explicitly frames this as a 'special reason' in line with the legislation (Fernqvist and Sépulchre, 2022). CT treats the disclosure as adding institutionally relevant information, thus orienting to their *previous* talk (extract 3a) as not having been seen as implicative of violence. First, CT responds with 'Oka:y' in line 24, with turn-final intonation and hearable note-taking marking the information as relevant and sufficient (cf., Monteiro, 2016), and then in line 30 begins a new turn: 'But then we will'. Although it is interrupted when C produces an account for the disclosure, it is the beginning of an upshot that specifies what the institutional ('we') response will be in light of the new information. Following C's account – that she must tell, if that is what is needed for her request to be deemed relevant – CT also displays agreement: 'yes well exactly' and then formulates the rule about 'special reasons' again (lines 35–36). Compared to the rule formulation in lines 12–15, CT here links the rule to C's disclosure, treating it as possibly relevant for assessing the case *in line with* C's wishes. In addition, CT formulates what she writes in C's file, verbalizing the recording of threats in a legal terminology that orients to the description as factual while making this interpretation available to the client (Monteiro, 2016). Meanwhile, CT's reformulation of the liable parent's actions ('transpired threats') obscures his agency.

The next extract differs from the previous in that C explicitly brings up IPV early on in the call, as she accounts for objecting to the SSIA's decision. Similarly to in the previous extracts, however, C begins in more general terms:

Extract 4a (ISSICS1897, 0:15 — 0:40)

- 01 C .Hhh å de e inte möjligt. De här har ja
.Hhh and that's not possible. This I've
- 02 pratat med er om (0.3) förut också.
talked to you about (0.3) before too.
- 03 CT Åke:j,
Oka:y,
- 04 (0.3)
- 05 C För att vi (0.5) kan inte ha (1.1) >nån<
Because we (0.5) can't have (1.1) >any<
- 06 kontakt.
contact.
- 07 (0.5)
- 08 CT Ne:j, .hhh
No:, .hhh
- 09 C Han e dömd flera gånger för (1.7) brott
He's convicted several times for (1.7) crimes
- 10 mot mej .h
against me .h

Similarly to what we saw in the first analytic section, C in line 1 begins her objection in a non-specific way, claiming that it is 'not possible' and that she and the father 'can't have any contact' – before specifying why this is. Compared to the caller in extract 3a, C thus phrases her objection as an objective fact rather than a personal preference and is more assertive in her claims, while referencing previous dealings with the SSIA regarding this matter. The use of 'can't' in line 5 further orients to this as beyond her control, while the emphasized extreme case formulation '>any< contact'(cf., Pomerantz, 1986) marks the situation as serious as it rules out even minimal communication or mediation (as well as contact between him and their children, as they live with her). CT facilitates C's account by continuers (lines 3 and 8), and C subsequently unpacks the reason for why they cannot have contact, explicitly invoking IPV in line 9. This is done by drawing on the assessment of an external authority – the court – which has convicted him 'several times', thus effectively supporting her claim (cf., Potter, 1996). The depicted situation is also in line with the 'special reasons' for which the SSIA should continue to mediate maintenance under the new regulations (cf., SFS, 2010:110). In this case, CT accordingly transfers C's claim to the back office for further investigation. In doing so, however, she prepares C that they might not view C's experiences as enough to warrant a changed decision, citing the general rule – if the liable parent has paid to the SSIA, the parents should then handle payments between themselves without SSIA involvement – before contrasting this with C's case:

Extract 4b (ISSICS1897, 05:17— 05:34)

- 01 CT Men eh: du får ju naturligtvis lämna synpunkter,
But uh: you can of course give opinions/views,
- 02 å sen får ju handläggaren ta ställning till de här
and then you know the case officer will assess this
- 03 om det anses som särskilda skä:1,
if it's considered special r̄ea:sons,
- 04 .Hhh så ja [kommer
.Hhh So I will
- 05 C [°°Ja°°
°°Yes°°
- 06 CT lämna över den här informationen till
transfer this information to
- 07 handläggaren nu,# .hhh eh å så
the case officer now,# .hhh uh and then
- 08 får han [titta på de.
he will look at it.
- 09 C [De handlar ju inte om (0.2)
It's not about you know (0.2)
- 10 att jag inte vi:ll, eller
that I don't wa:nt to, or

Here, CT's contrastive 'But' (line 1) indicates that C's case might not correspond to the general rule, and referring to C's objections as 'opinions' or 'views' suggests that they are not seen as constituting a 'special reason' for continued SSIA involvement. CT formulates referring the case to a back office decision-maker, thus treating further investigation as relevant, but describes the process in neutral terms without taking a stance as to whether C's request is likely to be granted or not. In lines 9–10, C responds by clarifying that her request does not have to do with what she 'wants', thus treating CT's turn as indicative of such a stance and objecting to it (cf., Flinkfeldt, 2017).

In sum, this section has shown how explicit disclosures of abuse can develop from initially general descriptions of problematic contacts with the other parent. The fact that CT in extract 3b had already initiated closing of the call when C discloses IPV illustrates how the tendency to treat parents' claimed problems relating to contact as *non*-indicative of IPV may be problematic. As CTs in our data typically do not ask follow-up questions to ensure that such descriptions are unrelated to IPV, they effectively place the burden on the caller to pursue the matter further. The final section examines a deviant case to this pattern, in which CT does ask about violence.

3. A deviant case: Call-takers may respond to callers' objections as indicative of possible violence

This section examines one out of two identified deviant examples in which the call-taker responds to the caller's vague – but in light of the analysis in the previous section

possibly violence-implicative – descriptions by pursuing the issue of IPV. Having received a decision letter about withdrawn maintenance support, C requests that the SSIA changes the decision:

Extract 5a (ISSICS1875, 0:25 – 0:46)

- 01 C Eh::: (0.2) Å där har ja en vä:djan
Uh::: (0.2) And there I have an appea:l
- 02 atth (0.6) inte (0.2) #göra så.#
toh (0.6) not (0.2) #do that.#
- 03 (0.7)
- 04 CT .tst Åke:jç °>Men då ska vi se (här
.tst Oka:yç °>But let's see (here
- 05 nu rå)<°
now then)<°
- 06 (6.5) ((typing sounds))
- 07 C De ha vari jä:tt:estrulit me- #me::#
It has been rea:lly troublesome wi- #with::#
- 08 Viktors pappa, Asså så för mi:n
Viktor's dad, Like so for my:
- 09 skull. >Eller fö< Viktors #skull
sake. >Or for< Viktor's #sake
- 10 kanske.#
maybe#

Right after greetings, C uses a ‘preliminary to a preliminary’ (‘I have an appea:l’, line 1) that marks the forthcoming request to change the decision as part of a larger, delicate project (Schegloff, 1980). The account, ‘it has been really troublesome’, depicts a problematic situation and is similar to the other examples in that it does not specify the problem. The person reference (‘Viktor’s dad’, line 8) further avoids describing the relationship between the parents and marks the father’s relationship to the child as the institutionally relevant connection (cf., Höglund and Flinkfeldt, submitted). Similarly, C shifts from accentuating her perspective (‘my: sake’) to replacing it with her son’s: ‘>Or for< Viktor’s #sake’ (line 9). This makes the problem hearable as extending beyond a parental conflict and opens up for the hearing that the father has inflicted harm on both mother and child (cf., Ingrid, 2014). In response, CT begins documenting C’s request, but interrupts to ask C to provide an account that aligns with the law’s ‘special reasons’:

Extract 5b (ISSICS1875, 0:51 – 1:03)

- (7 lines excluded)
- 18 (0.6)
- 19 CT >Åkej.< (0.5) Men- .hhh Då:
>Okay.< (0.5) But .hhh the:n
- 20 >ska=vi=se< men- J: >ja skriver in de.<
>lets'see< but- I: >I write that in.<

- 21 Men- men v[a:] e: d-
But- but wha:t is: th-
- 22 C [°M°]
- 23 CT Va e särskilda skä::let då >eller hur
What is the special rea::son then >or how
- 24 ska man säga,<
should one say,<
- 25 (1.0)
- 26 CT .Hhh Anledning[en till att
.Hhh The reason for
- 27 C [(Fö=att de=ehh)
(Because it'shh)
- 28 CT du inte vill att >han ska betala
you not wanting >him to pay
- 29 direkt<
directly<

CT here treats the request as institutionally relevant by formulating writing it down (line 20). C's claims thus far are, however, treated as insufficient as a 'special reason', as CT asks C to provide an account in line 23. CT's question and introduction of the relevant institutional terminology provides an opportunity for C to make any experiences of IPV explicit. When receiving no response, CT clarifies what she means in lines 26–29 (ignoring C's response in overlap, line 27). C then states her reason:

Extract 5c (ISSICS1875, 1:03 – 1:24)

- 30 (1.4)
- 31 C Nä:: men ja: Han kommer inte gö:ra de
No:: but well: He's not going to do: it
- 32 ti slut. Ja vet de.
in the end. I know that.
- 33 (0.5)
- 34 CT [Åkej,]
Okay,
- 35 C [Å han:]
And he:
- 36 (.)
- 37 C Asså han e jättearg för=re här.
Well he's really angry because of this.
- 38 (0.8)
- 39 C Fö=att ja har underhållsstödet.
That I have the maintenance support.
- 40 (0.3)
- 41 CT Å:kejç
Öka:yç

- 42 (0.9)
- 43 C Eh::m (0.4) å skriver eh=ess=em=ess
Uh::m (0.4) and writes uh text messages
- 44 (0.2) ti mej att #öh:::# att ja tar
(0.2) to me that #uh:::# that I take
- 45 hans pengar å så.
his money and such.
- 46 (0.9)
- 47 C Fö=att Viktor inte bor där.
Because Viktor doesn't live there.
- 48 (0.3)
- 49 C Ä::=
Uh::
- 50 CT =Åkejç
Okayç
- 51 (0.6)
- 52 C Så=att- de=e lite så
So- it's a bit like that

C's provided account is general as she describes financial actions in a way that could imply either financial abuse or neglect (he's not going to do it"). She also invokes emotion, that he is 'really angry', implicating unwillingness rather than inability as grounds for not paying. After receiving no uptake in line 38, C pursues a response by connecting the anger specifically to maintenance. CT responds with 'okayç' in line 41, thus encouraging further expansion but using a slightly questioning intonation. In response, C produces a more detailed account of the father's actions that supports her claim that the prospective arrangement is problematic: he writes text messages that she takes his money. This could be seen as a form of harassment and the turn-final 'and such' in line 45 makes this hearable as an example drawn from a broader category of actions, contributing to constructing the father as problematic (cf., Ingrid, 2014). After receiving no response in line 46, C again makes the connection to maintenance explicit by adding that the reason for the transactions is that the child does not live with the father (line 47), thus contributing to constructing the father as unreasonable as maintenance implies providing for one's child. However, CT does not treat C's account as sufficient, but encourages further expansion in line 50. As C does not give more details in line 52, CT asks about possible violence (in the form of threats):

Extract 5d (ISSICS1875, 1:24 – 1:36)

- 54 (0.5)
- 55 CT A::ç (0.4) .hh Men, men han hö:tar
Ye:::ahç (0.4) .hh But, but the doesn't threa:ten
- 56 dej inte. Utan ha- de=e mer att han e
you. But he- it's more that he's

57 arg eller,
 angry or,
 58 (0.9)
 59 C .Hh (.) Asså han är ju jättearg. Men
 .Hh (.) Well he is really angry you know. But
 60 de=e ju så här att han hä:r ju #ä#
 it's like this you know that he hä:s you know #uh:#
 61 alkoholproblem. (.) ä: Tobias,
 alcohol problems. (.) uh: Tobias,
 62 (0.4)
 63 CT A=åkejç
 Yea=okayç

The first part of CT's multi-unit question (Linell et al., 2003), 'but he doesn't threa:ten you', orients to the possibility of violence but is a declarative with negative polarity that prefers a 'no' response (Raymond, 2003), thus treating IPV as unlikely. The second part of the question, 'it's more that he's angry or', similarly prefers a 'yes' and treats anger not as implicative of IPV, but contrastive to it. All in all, CT treats IPV as possible, but designs her questions in a way that discourages such disclosures. In line with this, C's dispreferred response is delayed and is a transformative (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010) and non-type conforming (Raymond, 2003) answer that neither confirms or disconfirms occurrence of violence, although the emotion is upgraded: 'Well, he is really angry you know' (line 59). C thus resists the terms of the question – that being angry and being violent should be understood as different things – but in contrast to the caller in extract 3b, she does this in a way that leaves it to CT to assess whether her account in fact constitutes special reasons, leaving any occurrence of IPV implicit.

This example deviates from the others since it shows how CT treats C's vague descriptions of a conflictual situation as making relevant a question about violence. Although CT in this way opens up for more explicit disclosures, the design of the question in fact discourages such tellings, thus confirming our previous analyses.

Concluding discussion

The analysis has shown how callers object to the institutional decision that they must manage maintenance transfers directly with the other parent, by raising problems with parental contact. These problems can be understood as conflict or cooperative difficulties, but also make possible intimate partner violence (IPV) inferentially available without explicitly categorizing events as abuse. This corresponds with how IPV is disclosed and dealt with in other institutional settings (e.g. Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1999; Rober et al., 2006; Tennent and Weatherall, 2019). For a 'special reasons' exception to be made, call-takers thus need to recognize that descriptions of conflict *might* in some cases be implicative of IPV, and work to enable such disclosures to document and transfer the client to special investigators assessing possible IPV cases. However, our data show that

call-takers tend to respond minimally, avoiding both follow-up questions about abuse and informing callers that experience of abuse could make them eligible for continued maintenance support. Rather, call-takers tend to encourage parental contact, which is treated as a practical matter and, in the few cases where they ask about violence, work to discourage disclosure of such experiences. Consequently, callers with experiences of IPV may not realize that they need to disclose this in a more explicit way, or may find it difficult to do so when such tellings are not facilitated by the case officer. This may impact on their possibilities to receive maintenance and lead them to have contact with the other parent, also where this is unsuitable or potentially harmful (cf., Tegler, Fernqvist and Flinkfeldt, 2022).

These findings highlight the need for training in both recognizing the various forms that IPV may take (especially psychological and financial abuse, which case officers seem to struggle to detect), and developing communicative skills for how to respond to parents' talk about conflict in a way that facilitates IPV disclosures if relevant. Communication training based on CA methods (e.g. Stokoe, 2014) can show the effects of professional practice and add nuance to sometimes rigid guidelines. The Social Insurance Agency has recently – after our data collection – stipulated that call-takers should ask about violence, but the guidelines do not address how vague or implicit accounts should be dealt with. The study thus contributes insight into the difficulties associated with raising the topic of violence in this setting, and may inform further development of both guidelines and training. An important question for future research is whether asking about violence works in intended ways – the fact that call-takers in our data refrained from doing this suggests that asking may not be so straight-forward – and whether different formats for asking may be more or less effective.

By examining naturally occurring frontline encounters with clients, we have shown how the maintenance reform's reliance on identification and assessment of IPV is problematic given how such matters are dealt with in interaction. This highlights how conversation analysis – by examining the practical implementation and the way new regulations are explained and resisted in practice – can contribute important knowledge for understanding policy and policy change.

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