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Self-disclosures in online crisis counselling: levelling asymmetries while maintaining client-focus

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ABSTRACT

While self-disclosures are often cautioned against in social work practice, research on crisis helplines has shown that self-disclosures can be connected to positive outcomes. Based on conversation analysis of 38 online chats, drawn from a larger corpus of crisis helpline interactions, the current paper unpacks the details of how trained volunteer counsellors use self-disclosures to support work with clients. The findings demonstrate how vague and general self-disclosures maintain a focus on the client and offer clients opportunities rather than requirements to learn. In online talk about suicide, self-disclosures are beneficial because they provide a way to display investment and understanding, which may be more difficult without verbal resources. On the other hand, self-disclosures often require clients to wait for counsellors to type in a time-sensitive situation. Showing this, the study contributes knowledge on interactional resources in online communication, in particular the work whereby counsellors and clients manage asymmetries connected to who knows, who can share, and who decides about courses of actions.

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Introduction

Crisis helplines have since the 1950s comprised an important resource in the wider set of suicide prevention services (Gould et al. 2022; Mishara and Daigle 2000). With the rise of online services, web-based crisis helplines have developed with the aim to provide low-threshold, short-term support (e.g. Westerlund and Krysinska 2021). Helplines are often staffed by trained volunteers and are thus part of the voluntary social work sector (cf. Linde & Scaramuzzino 2017). Public spending to support voluntary-based helplines has dramatically increased in the Nordic countries in recent years (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2021; Loga 2018). This mirrors a shift where civil society organizations are today doing work linked to classic welfare areas, such as providing emotional support to persons in vulnerable situations (Jegermalm et al. 2020). While studies show that clients appreciate helpline ideals connected to being treated as a person rather than a patient (e.g. Iversen and Westerlund 2022; Pollock et al. 2012), there is still little knowledge on how helpline counsellors manage such ideals in practice.

Quantitative studies have shown positive outcomes of online communication in suicide prevention related to changes in clients' emotional states during helpline interactions (Mazzer et al. 2021). Studies also show patterns in responses that promote positive outcome, such as density of text and promptness of counsellors' responses (Sindahl and van Dolen 2020). However, there is a lack of qualitative research on crisis helplines, which can shed light on how clients make sense of their problems (Hvidt, Ploug, and Holm 2016), and the

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interactional consequences of counsellors' responses. The current paper addresses this gap by using conversation analysis to examine interaction on a Swedish online crisis helpline. The article focuses on counsellors' use of self-disclosures – practices by which people offer news about themselves that the situation does not require: without being specifically asked, they reveal information concerning the self (Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar 2005).

Previous research indicates that self-disclosures can be productively used in voluntary social work; for example, people can disguise advice as a story about their own struggle and success (Pudlinski 1998). However, self-disclosures have also been warned against because they can disrupt the progression of the interaction (McDaniel et al. 2007) and result in role reversal, where the client starts expressing sympathy for the practitioner (Audet 2011; Pudlinski 1998). This is a reason why helpline counsellors are often discouraged to self-disclose (Pollock et al. 2010). Nonetheless, Mishara et al. (2007) found that while managers in a study of American crisis telephone helplines named self-disclosure as a behaviour to avoid, counsellors talking about themselves was significantly related to improved mood in callers, including decreased suicidal ideation. In an interview study with people who identified as frequent callers to the Australian helpline Lifeline, interviewees said they were looking for a call-taker who 'forgot the rules and told them something about themselves' (Middleton et al. 2016). Accordingly, self-disclosures represent a phenomenon in crisis helplines where practice and guidelines mismatch, which warrant further examination of what kind of interactional work they are involved in.

Drawing on conversation analysis of counsellors' self-disclosures, this paper shows that by using vague and general self-disclosures, counsellors demonstrate their knowledge of and investment in the client's experiences, while remaining a focus on clients. The self-disclosures are built as opportunities to learn, while not prescribing specific solutions to the clients' problems. Based on these findings, the paper discusses the benefits and risks involved with self-disclosures, in particular related to the social problem of suicide and the interactional restrictions involved with showing understanding and investment in online interactions (cf. Christensen, Frederiksen, and Madsen 2021; Iversen and Westerlund 2022; Mazzer et al. 2021; Sindahl and van Dolen 2020).

Self-disclosures in relationship work

A fruitful way to understand self-disclosures is related to how people manage self-other relations in interaction. Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014) have shown that self-other relations are anchored in three orders: knowledge, emotion, and power. This echoes other approaches to communication, for example, Tomasello's (2008) suggestion that informing, requesting, and sharing make up the three basic communicative motives. The epistemic order refers to the connections between people based on knowledge, for example, who has the right to know and assess experiences (cf. Pomerantz 1980). The emotional order refers to participants' rights to 'own' emotions and express them to others. And the deontic order refers to the social organization of power: who has rights and obligations in deciding about actions in the world (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014). These orders are intertwined; for instance, Iversen (2021) shows that helpline counsellors are afforded with increased epistemic rights if they first show that they understand the emotional impact of the client's situation.

Self-disclosures are related to the epistemic order since they often come as second stories in response to a person's telling, showing how the speaker understands the gist of the previous speaker's story (Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar 2005; Leudar, Antaki, and Barnes 2006; Pudlinski 1998). In a wide range of settings, such as homoeopathic medicine and police interviews, self-disclosures have been showed to display empathy, which is related to the emotional order (Childs and Walsh 2017; Ruusuvuori 2005; Stokoe 2009). They can further display shared knowledge or temporarily suspend institutional roles (Heinemann 2007; Stokoe 2009). In line

with this, Mishara et al. (2007) suggest that self-disclosures may be useful in telephone crisis helplines to counterwork the distance imposed by the telephone modality. Self-disclosures can also be related to deontic rights because volunteers can use them to manage advice giving. In a study of a peer support mental health support helpline where volunteers had personal experiences of mental health problems, Pudlinski (1998) showed that volunteers could disclose past problems to appear to be sharing while also offering a solution to the client's problem. However, Pudlinski (1998) also noted that self-disclosures could reverse roles since the clients often started to focus on the volunteer's problem.

By examining self-disclosures in online crisis support, this study aims to shed light on their risks and benefits, thereby contributing to the knowledge on how people work up relationships with limited resources in high stakes situations (cf. Christensen, Frederiksen, and Madsen 2021).

Materials and methods

The helpline under study is Sweden's first crisis line with telephone and online service, formed by a non-profit organization in 2012. The current study focuses on the online chats, while phone calls have been analysed elsewhere (Iversen 2021; Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen 2022). At the time of data collection, volunteers were trained in a three-day-workshop that covered information about suicide risk factors, suicide myths, and communication training, mainly in active listening and motivational interviewing. Many volunteers have personal experiences of dealing with suicidality but it is not a requirement. Instead, a major part of the volunteers has retired from an occupation where they encountered persons in crisis, e.g. social work, health care, and education. In addition, many volunteers are students in social work and psychology. User anonymity limits information about clients, but volunteers' estimates from a survey filled out after each chat showed that the most common reasons for contacting the chat was suicide thoughts (49%), sadness (41%), anxiety (24%), and loneliness (17%). The data for the current study was drawn from a database with 1240 chats, of which 256 chats were excluded because they included no interaction. The chats were collected at three points in time during 2018. Volunteers provided written consent and clients received a short message when entering the chat where they could decline participation. Only chats where both volunteers and helpline users consented to having their chats analysed were saved and included in the study.

The focus on self-disclosures emerged through the analysis. I first selected the 603 chats categorized in the volunteer survey as concerning suicidal ideation. The analysis is thus limited to the use of self-disclosures in chats where suicide is a topic. In other kinds of chats, e.g. those characterized by small talk, self-disclosures may be used differently (cf. Iversen et al. 2022). To get a varied sample, I then selected the chats where the volunteers responded 'yes' (87 chats) and 'no' (67 chats) to the question 'Did you feel like you could make any difference in the conversation?'. Reading through all chats, self-disclosures emerged as a recurrent practice – one or several self-disclosures occurred in 38 chats, of which 30 were categorized by the volunteers as having made a difference. In addition to collecting chats, I did ethnographic research at the helpline, including participating in the volunteer training and discussing preliminary findings with experienced volunteers. Practices connected to 'being personal' also emerged as a topic about which volunteers and managers were uncertain. I excluded cases where volunteers' were only displaying reactions ('Now I almost cursed') or a personal stance ('I'm believing in you'). These where plentiful and could be categorized as self-disclosures (Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar 2005), but they differed from what was institutionally considered 'talking about yourself'.

Conversation analysis examines the relation between turns-at-talk (Sidnell and Stivers 2014). While participants in online interaction, like others, are oriented to building organized courses of action designed for one or several recipients (cf. Meredith and Stokoe 2014), there are important differences between online chatting and oral conversation in regards to turn-taking. Persons in oral conversations are aware of the production of a turn, but people who chat only see the product in terms of the posted contribution. Some chat systems allow the recipient to see whether their co-participant is typing (e.g. Ekberg et al. 2016) but this is not the case in the studied helpline. Because utterance production is not intersubjectively accessible, the sequential placement of utterances is often disrupted and so participants can have difficulties interpreting the relation between posts (Garcia and Jacobs 1999).

Thus, while it is possible to draw on conversation analytic findings to guide the analysis of turn design and how actions relate to one another (Stommel 2012), the quasi-synchronous nature of the interaction means that I (as well as the participants) cannot not analyse the production of turns (cf. Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016). My analysis is therefore focused on how posts are sequentially located in interaction and how they are built, for example in terms of grammar and word choice. I examined how participants aligned with the other's action (contributed to the action trajectory, for example by responding to a question with an answer) and affiliated with the other's epistemic, emotional, and deontic stance (e.g. supporting an annoyed stance; Stivers 2008). To protect volunteers' anonymity, I have based the presentation on vague self-disclosures, which represented the majority of self-disclosures in the data. Excerpts are presented with original Swedish and English translation in a second line. In the translation, I have retained misspellings and grammatical errors. The study was approved in ethical trial [Dnr 217/510].

Results

The analysis shows that by using vague and general self-disclosures, volunteers demonstrate their understanding of and investment in clients' experiences while still remaining a focus on the clients. The self-disclosures are often built as opportunities for clients to learn from the volunteers, while not prescribing specific solutions to the clients' problems. These findings are presented in three sections, first showing the work of self-disclosures as they detour from solution-focus activities, then self-disclosures in environments of disagreement, and finally self-disclosures that present the volunteer's learning process.

Sharing a stance

By examining cases where self-disclosures stand alone in a turn, this section shows how self-disclosures can be used in helpline chats to detour from a solution-focused project and invite emotional affiliation. Excerpt 1 is from a chat that we will follow in all three analytic sections. The client has started the chat at 19:20 in the evening, writing, 'I feel really bad, I have hurt myself several times today. I am going to take my life'. The volunteer initially elicits information about the client's situation, after which they ask a question about activities that the client usually enjoys. Such questions are common in the helpline chats and in line with motivational interviewing (cf. Härnbro, Dahlstedt, and Herz 2021). The client aligns by mentioning needlecraft and embroidery, a topic that the volunteer pursues. Our focus is on line 29–31, where the volunteer offers personal information about their relation to embroidery:

Excerpt 1a 26197

25	19:52:18 VOL:	Broderar du efter färdiga förlagor eller hitta du på egna saker?
		Are you embroidering based on existing patterns or do you invent your own stuff?
26		(75)[1]
27	19:53:33 CLI:	Nja, nej inte så. Jag broderar efter färdiga förlagor.
		Well, no not like that. I'm embroidering after existing patterns.
28		(73)
29	19:54:46 VOL:	Min morfar hade en bonad på den var det texten: Från och
		My grandpa had a tapestry on it was the text: From
30		med imorgon ska jag spara. . ..varje dag drog han samma
		tomorrow I will save . . ..every day he made the same
31		skämt när han tittade på den. . ..aha. . .från imorgon
		joke when he looked at it . . . .oh . . . from tomorrow
32	19:56:07 CLI:	Jaha, haha
		Oh right, haha
33		(87)
34	19:57:34 VOL:	Kan du inte göra egna förlagor som du broderar vackert. . .
		Couldn't you make your own patterns that you embroider beautifully . . .
35		skriver texter och mönster som du själv tycker är viktiga att
		write texts and patterns that you think are important to
36		sprida. . .dela med dig av vad du känner? Jag är inte bra på
		spread . . . share what you feel? I'm not good at
37		handarbeten, men jag beundrar alla som är
		needlecraft, but I admire everyone who is
38		(62)
39	19:58:36 CLI:	Det har jag aldrig tänkt på, men kanske.
		I never thought about that, but maybe.

The client picks the alternative 'existing patterns' (line 27) from the volunteer's polar question (line 25). The volunteer then launches a self-disclosing story about embroidery and their 'grandpa' (line 29–31). This story is not related to the client's specific answer about their embroidery preferences; rather, it takes an equal footing in terms of sharing the volunteer's personal relation to embroidery. Dionigi and Canestrari (2018) show that jokes in therapy can be involved in role-switching, changing therapist-client asymmetries. In this sense, this self-disclosure can be understood as detouring from the project of trying to find a solution for the client. The story includes a joke with the grandpa presented as the author (line 30–31). This slightly distanced footing invites emotional affiliation but does not require a grand gesture of appreciation from the client. The client offers an aligning answer, picking up on the informative side ('Oh right') and then on the humour with the transcribed laughter, 'haha' (line 30), which shows an appropriate understanding of the joke as a joke (Sacks 1978). Unlike in face-to-face interaction, where the last action is usually the first responded to, research on text-based interaction shows that the recipient tends to respond in the order in which the initiated actions have been positioned by the first participant (Petitjean and Morel 2017). Thus, there is no sign that either participant treat the laughter as delayed or fake; rather, the self-disclosure is affiliated with as a funny joke.

The volunteer then initiates a new sequence, relaunching the project of getting the client to do something related to embroidery. The request (line 31–33) moves in the opposite direction of the client's information (that they use existing patterns) and frames embroidery as therapeutic work in terms of sharing what one feels. Curl and Drew (2008) show that when people use modal verbs (e.g. can/could you), they treat their requests as

unproblematic. The volunteer thus assumes entitlement to request this action from the client. However, the volunteer finishes the turn with another self-disclosure, 'I'm not good at needlework, but admire everyone who is' (line 33–34). This downplays the volunteer's expertise, and therefore their entitlement to provide advice. In this sense, the client is addressed as the expert of an admirable kind of needlework and the volunteer's request is brought off as an idea from a novice. The client responds with a tentative, yet positive, 'I've never thought about that, but maybe' (line 35), which aligns by treating the volunteer's proposal as a new idea, worthy of consideration.

In the next example, the self-disclosure comes when the volunteer shares their views on the client's problems. We join the chat in the beginning, as the client is producing their initial problem description – that they want to leave a 'psychologically mean' boyfriend:

Excerpt 2 21138

01	11:54:45 CLI:	vill lämna min kille som är elak psykiskt men jag vågar inte
		wanna leave my boyfriend who's mean psychologically but I don't dare
02		(30)
03	11:55:15 CLI:	är rädd för att han ska bli sådär sur och arg som han kan
		afraid that he's gonna become as grumpy and angry a he can be
04		(71)
05	11:56:26 VOL:	Ibland undrar jag varför det inte finns ett ämne i skolan
		Sometimes I wonder why there isn't a subject in school
06		som lär en hur man lämnar destruktiva relationer…
		that teaches one how you leave destructive relationships…
07		(33)
08	11:56:59 CLI:	det gör jag med, man borde lära sig saker i skolan so
		I do too, you should really learn things in school tha
09		faktiskt har med verkligheten att göra
		actually relates to realitly
10		(27)
11	11:57:26 VOL:	Håller med
		Agree
12		(8)
13	11:57:34 VOL:	Men nu till dig
		But over to you now
14		(51)
15	11:58:25 VOL:	Hur kan du få tillräckligt med självförtroende för att lämna
		How can you get enough self-confidence to leave
16		en kille som inte är bra för dig?
		a boyfriend who isn't good for you?
17		(99)
18	12:00:04 CLI:	jag vet vrkligen inte, har sagt att han ska packa sina saker och
		I rlly don't know, have said that he should pack his things and ((continues))

The client's description of wanting to leave but not daring (line 1) can be heard as recruiting the volunteer's advice by expressing a need (cf. Kendrick and Drew 2016). Before the volunteer posts a response, the client offers another description, of feeling afraid, which makes relevant emotional affiliation (line 3; cf. Jefferson and Lee 1992). Pace is difficult to analyse in chats with no access to people's activities during silences (cf. Garcia and Jacobs 1999). In the data, one minute's silence between posts were common in chats without visible problems. We can say, however, that the 71 seconds' gap (line 4) gives the client a chance to elaborate, which they do not.

The volunteer's assessment, then, 'Sometimes I wonder why there isn't a subject in school that teaches one how to leave destructive relationships' (line 5–6), offers their own stance about the lack of preparedness for young people to deal with the client's problems. By translating the client's problem to the category 'destructive relationships', and using general pronouns ('one') as well as by talking about it as something that everyone needs to learn in school, the volunteer treats the client's problem as serious, and one they are invested in personally. The volunteer thus, like in Excerpt 1, positions themselves on an equal footing to that of the client – not claiming to know the client's particular experiences, but offering their own take on the client's problem. With this self-disclosure, the volunteer is thus affiliating with the client's problem report by treating it as a general problem about which they care.

A relevant response to an assessment is agreement (Pomerantz 1984), which the client is quick (in 33 seconds, line 7) to deliver (line 8), using an upgraded assessment. This produces the volunteer's stance as a complaint about what one learns in school (line 8–9). Thus, the participants are now on an equal epistemic and emotional footing. The volunteer affiliates by offering a return agreement (line 11), and then promptly (after 8 seconds, line 12) produces a new turn, where they explicitly change track to focusing on the client ('But over to you now', line 13). Hereby, the volunteer closes down the complaint trajectory after having established this shared position. This turn projects a next, which comes as a solution-focused question ('How can you get enough self-confidence . . . ', line 15). The question format remains the equal footing in the sense that it produces the issue as a question for both of them to explore.

In both examples, the volunteers' self-disclosures can be understood as making detours from the project of suggesting a course of action that will make the client feel better, thereby disrupting the progression of the interactions (McDaniel et al. 2007). This interactional work, in terms of offering and inviting emotional affiliation, relaxes the asymmetric positions of telling someone about a problem (client) and trying to solve it (volunteer). Making relevant emotional affiliation could be seen as problematic by focusing on the volunteers (cf. Pudlinski 1998), but the volunteers' sharing is not related to previous difficult experiences – which might invoke clients' sympathy – but to a harmless (not taboo or 'dirty') joke and a stance against a general problem, which invites affiliation and agreement. In the next section, we will examine how the volunteers draw on personal experience in environments of disagreement.

Right to disagree

A particularly challenging aspect of the volunteers' work at the crisis helpline is having to disagree with clients. In this section, we will see two different ways in which volunteers use self-disclosures to legitimately disagree with clients who advocate suicide. We start with a high-stakes case where the client has initiated the chat at 06.53 in the morning, saying that they will end their life by jumping in front of the train, arriving at 07.05. This time passes during the conversation, which we join at 07.17, after the volunteer has said that suicide is no solution. This is, accordingly, a challenging, argumentative situation.

Excerpt 3a

10	07:17:50 CLI:	För mig är de en lösning!
		For me it's a solution!
11		(22)
12	07:18:12 VOL:	Jo jag förstår att du tror det.
		JO I understand that you believe that.

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

13		har du familj?
		have you got family?
14		(52)
15	07:19:04 CLI:	Jag år ((borttaget)).
		I om ((redacted, teenager)).
16		(21)
17	07:19:25 VOL:	mamma, pappa, syskon `?
		mom, dad, sibling `?
18		(228)
19	07:23:13 CLI:	Mamma pappa ((borttaget kön på syskon))
		Mom dad ((redacted gender of sibling))
20		(76)

The client's assessment, 'For me it's a solution' (line 10) is clearly problematic from a suicide preventive view. The volunteer's response (line 12) thus understandably misaligns with the action trajectory, as well as disaffiliates with the client's emotional stance. Treating the client's evaluation of their situation as a 'belief' (line 12) is a way to relativize it – it is not the truth but the client's version. By claiming access to the clients' mind ('you believe that', line 11), the volunteer therefore indicates that they have more comprehensive knowledge about the situation (cf. Pomerantz 1980). The design of the volunteer's turn mitigates this dispreferred response in several ways: the response token, 'Jo' (line 12) projects grammatical dispreference (cf. Heinemann, 2005) and the claim to understand the client's mind is a way to state affiliation in words, while still advancing a different agenda (cf. Weatherall and Keevallik 2016).

Online interaction allows therapists to, in the same post, combine orientations to emotion with attempts to shift the focus of discussion (Ekberg et al. 2016). The volunteer's question, 'have you got family' (line 13) can be understood in this light, shifting the discussion from the client's subjective stance (line 10) to the relevance of this category in discussions about suicide. The client provides information about their age (line 15), and then after the volunteer's pursuit (line 17) describes their family members (line 19). The volunteer then offers an assessment, linking the relevance of family to their prior disaffiliative response (line 21–23):

Excerpt 3b

21	07:24:29 VOL:	Jag är övertygad om att de skulle sakna dig enormt mycket
		I'm convinced that they'd miss you enormously much
22		om du försvann, och den fruktansvärda smärtan kommer
		if you disappeared, and that horrible pain will
23		aldrig att försvinna så länge de lever. Tro mig, jag vet!
		never disappear as long as they live. Believe me, I know!
24		(34)
25	07:25:03 CLI:	Har någon du känner tagit sitt liv?
		Has someone you know taken their life?
26		(203)
27	07:28:26 CLI:	Och nej ingen kommer sakna mig!
		And no nobody's going to miss me!
28		(33)
29	07:28:59 VOL:	Jo asbsolut!
		JO asbsolutly!
30		(13)

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

31	07:29:12 VOL:	*absolut **absolutely*
32		(107)
33	07:30:59 CLI:	Nej! Och jag kommer ta livet av mig nu! *No! And I will take my life now!*

The volunteer's lexical choice ('convinced') assumes full access to the events after a potential suicide and the hyperbole and extreme case formulations ('horrible pain', 'never go away') treats those consequences as dire and certain (cf. Pomerantz 1986). The volunteer backs this claim with the self-disclosure, 'Believe me, I know' (line 23). Because people orient to an interactional rule not to make claims with insufficient basis (cf. Grice 1975), the volunteer can be heard as referring to personal experience of suicide in the family. This is different from the self-disclosures in the previous section, which levelled asymmetries in the way they displayed investment and invited clients to agree. By contrast, this self-disclosure assumes that the volunteer, better than the client, can know and assess the reactions of the client's family. Thereby, the self-disclosure affords the volunteer with increased epistemic rights.

In response, the client asks about the volunteer's personal life (line 25), initiating an insert expansion before accepting/refuting the volunteer's claim to know. This question thus moves away from the volunteer asking questions and making assessments about suicide as a non-solution, to a situation where the client treats the volunteer's experiences as relevant to the progression of the conversation. 203 seconds pass without a post from the volunteer (line 26), after which the client refutes the volunteer's claim about their family (line 27). The volunteer promptly (after 33 seconds, line 28) and strongly disagrees (line 29) and takes the time to repair a spelling mistake (line 31). The disagreement escalates and the client claims that they will end their life (line 33), after which they disengage from the chat.

The volunteer's lack of response (line 26) to the client's question (line 25) can be seen as a missed opportunity to engage the client in talking, getting them away from an acutely dangerous situation (cf. Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen 2022). The online modality, where the client cannot see the production of the volunteer's turns (Ekberg et al. 2016; Garcia and Jacobs 1999), may be involved in this; the client would not have seen if the volunteer started to respond to them. A problem may thus be that balanced responses, related to the question of 'what to share' with self-disclosures, involve delay in a time-sensitive situation, while refutations (such as line 29) are quick to produce.

In the next excerpt, we return to the initial embroidery case (from Excerpt 1) eight posts from where we left it. The client has withdrawn their tentative agreement to try designing their own patterns by saying that embroidery is not sufficiently meaningful to stay alive. They offer the subject side assessment, 'I just wanna die' in line 54, an emotional stance that the volunteer cannot simply support without risking to endorse suicidal ideation:

Excerpt 4 (continues from 1). 26197

54	20:06:28 CLI:	Jag orkar inte leva, inte göra några skisser, jag vill bara dö… *I can't manage living, not make sketches, I just wanna die …*
55		(93)
56	20:08:01 VOL:	Jag hör dig…jag lyssnar…men säg mig, hur kan jag ge dig *I hear you … I'm listening … but tell me, how can I give you*
57		mod och ork just nu…

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

		courage and energy right now . . .
58		(57)
59	20:08:58 CLI:	Jag vet inte. . .
		I don't know . . .
60		(89)
61	20:10:27 VOL:	Om jag kunde skulle jag göra allt för att du skulle lita på
		If I could I would do anything for you to trust
62		mig. . .. det bli bättre igen, även om det inte känns så just
		me . . . . It ges better again, even if it doesn't feel like it right
63		nu. . .jag har också varit där du är just nu. . ..men jag är glad
		now . . . I have also been where you are right now . . . .but I'm glad
64		att jag inte gav upp. . ..låt oss fortsätta prata här lite till,
		I didn't give up . . . .let's keep talking here a little longer,
65		orkar du?
		can you manage?
66		(103)
67	20:12:10 CLI:	Ja, men är det okej för dig? Vi har pratat i snart en timme.
		Yeah, but is it okay for you? We have been talking for an hour soon.
68		Får du dela med dig?
		Can you share?

After failing to elicit the client's views on how to help, the volunteer returns with a post that includes the self-disclosure 'I have also been where you are now . . . but I'm glad I didn't give up' line 63–64). By talking about the client's current situation as 'right now' (line 62, 63), the volunteer subtly treats this situation as passing. Stressing that suicidal ideation, as feelings, is tied to the present difficult situation, has been shown to work as a way to orient to the temporality of such thoughts while also displaying empathy (Iversen 2021). The self-disclosure, in this sense, both describes and presents a success story (line 64). Similar to Excerpt 3b, the self-disclosure increases the volunteer's epistemic rights by referring to personal experience. However, in contrast to that volunteer's display of epistemic certainty ('I'm convinced' Excerpt 3b, line 21), this volunteer presents their lesson as emotional ('I'm glad', line 63). This subjective assessment limits the scope of the conclusion and so it contributes to bringing off the story as an opportunity to learn rather than necessarily true for the client.

In addition, the self-disclosure is vague about the volunteer's experiences. Vagueness, indirectness, and generality have been identified as resources in relation to delicate topics (e.g. end of life matters; Parry, Land, and Seymour 2014; Peyrot 1987) and actions (e.g. complaining; Iversen and Evaldsson, 2020). These resources invite recipients to a course of action without making them conditionally relevant (Iversen and Evaldsson, 2020; Parry, Land, and Seymour 2014). Generality and vagueness also increase the scope of the volunteers' experiences, making them more likely to correspond with the client's own (cf. Koskinen and Stevanovic 2022).

The post is finished with a proposal ('let's keep talking . . . ' line 64), further providing the client with deontic rights. Proposals suggest a course of action but treat the realization of this action as contingent upon the recipient's acceptance (Stevanovic et al. 2022). This contingency is made clear in the volunteer's turn-final question 'can you manage?' (line 66). The client responds in a way that first affiliates with the volunteer's orientation to their deontic rights by granting the request to continue talking. After showing

consideration for the volunteer and their time ('but is it okay for you . . . ' line 67), they respond to the self-disclosure as relevant for them, asking the volunteer if they can share.

Thus, in this section, volunteers use self-disclosures to display rights to know and assess the clients' situation. This is related to the deontic work of getting clients to rethink their claims about suicide being a solution/not wanting to live. In both cases, the clients topicalize the self-disclosures in their next post, asking the volunteers to elaborate. In this sense, self-disclosures could be seen as blurring boundaries and risking a focus on the volunteer instead of the client (cf. Pudlinski 1998). On the other hand, the questions can, as we will see in the final analytic section, engender stories about the volunteers designed for the benefit of the client.

Offering a lesson learned

This section further unpacks how vague self-disclosures can be built for the client as an opportunity to learn. The excerpt exemplifying this continues directly from Excerpt 4 where the client asked if the volunteer could share. The volunteer grants the request (line 70–72):

Excerpt 5 (continues from 1 and 4). 26197

69		(39)
70	20:13:29 VOL:	klart det är okej. . .jag känner ju din förtvivlan. . .och vet hur
		of course it's okay . . . I sense your despair . . . and know how
71		det kan kännas. . .när mörkret ta grepp. . ..du har säkert varit
		it can feel . . . when the darkness taks its grip . . . you have probably been
72		där förut. . .hur vände det då?
		there before . . . how did it turn around then?
73		(109)
74	20:15:18 CLI:	Jag brukar skada mig för att få mörkret att minska. . .eller
		I usually hurt myself to make the darkness decrease . . . or
75		planera min död. . .
		plan my death . . .
76		(408)
77	20:22:00 VOL:	Det är ett sätt man gör för att, hur tokig det än må låter,
		That's a way one does to, however strange it may sound,
78		känner sig levande. . ..visst låter det helt knasig. . .man vill
		feel alive . . . it sounds completely weird right . . . one wants
79		dö för det gör så ont i själen, man vill bara inte känna så
		to die 'cause it hurts so in the soul, one just doesn't want to feel that
80		längre. . ..MEN en dag slog det mig. . .jag vill visst leva men
		anymore . . . .BUT one day it hit me . . . I actually want to live but
81		'som mig själv'. . .jag hade inte tänkt på att all min smärta
		'as myself' . . . I hadn't thought about all my pain
82		och förtvivlan berodde på att jag inte visste hur jag skulle
		and despair depending on me not knowing how to
83		älska mig själv. . .det kändes högfärdig och konstigt att göra
		love myself . . . it felt haughty and strange to do
84		det. . ..jag upptäckte att jag nästan tog knyt på mig själv för
		that . . . .I discovered that I almost tied myself into a knot for

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

85		att andra skulle älska mig. . .liksom om jag måste göra något *others to love me . . . like I had to do something*
86		för att vara värd andras kärlek. . ..där bottnade allt i, min *to be worthy of others' love . . . .everything stemmed from that, my*
87		egen självförakt. . ..jag fick lära mig att äntligen förlika mig *own self-contempt . . . .I got to learn to finally conciliate*
88		med mig själv. . ..ingen annan kan göra det eller lära en. . ..man *with myself . . . nobody else can do that or teach you . . . one*
89		måste helt enkelt titta på sig själv så som man är. . ..jag är *must simply look at oneself as one is . . . I am*
90		älskvärd just som jag är. . ..inte för det jag gör eller borde göra. . .. *worthy of love just as I am . . . not for what I do or should do . . . .*
91		(148)
92	20:24:28 CLI:	Tack för att du delar med dig! Jag känner igen mig mycket *Thanks for sharing! I recognize myself a lot*
93		i det du skriver. . . *in what you write . . .*

The volunteer's metaphoric description (line 71) is vague and works as an account of why they can share rather than represents sharing in itself. It continues with a yes/no declarative, hedged with 'probably' carefully assuming that the client has been in (and recovered from) this situation before. This assumption becomes explicit in their question about how it turned around for them (line 72). Accordingly, instead of actually sharing, the volunteer elicits a success story. The client aligns with the volunteer's question by offering information, recycling the metaphor of darkness (line 74–75).

In terms of a suicide preventive project, hurting oneself and planning one's death (line 74–75) may not be useful elements. However, after a long gap (408 seconds, line 76), the volunteer frames it as part of 'feeling alive' (line 78). Using the general pronoun 'one' (line 77), the volunteer treats the client's experience as general, and as such, as known to them. In this sense, the volunteer can be understood as carefully instructing the client on how they should interpret their own experience. The volunteer then switches to their personal revelation: 'BUT one day it hit me' (line 80). Jefferson (2004) has showed that when describing extraordinary events, speakers use the contrast structure, 'First I thought. . .but then I realized', demonstrating their unexpected character in a context of normality. In a similar way, the volunteer presents 'One wants to die' (line 78–79) as a normal way of feeling in their situation. Then the volunteer details their personal revelation, including realizing why they felt bad ('not knowing how to love myself', 'self-contempt', line 82–83, 87) and the lessons learned. Producing this shift as out of the blue is attentive to the client's situation, where they have described not expecting improvement.

As the story is still vague about the volunteer's situation and centres on what they learned, it can be read as done in the service of educating the client about a successful way of dealing with 'darkness', not to gain sympathy. Using self-disclosures is thus here, like in the cases of disagreement, a way to imply that the volunteer knows more than the client – both having experienced the client's feelings and evolved from this. In addition, it tones down its function as education – it is presented as 'I got to learn' (line 87) rather than 'one needs to learn', again presenting the client with an opportunity rather than requirement to follow the volunteer's example.

The client responds in a way that supports this interpretation – not by treating it as evoking sympathy or praise, but as sharing an experience that helps them understand their own situation ('I recognize myself . . . ', line 92–93). Thus, the volunteer's link to the general, as well as their focus on lessons learned while being vague on the specifics of their situation, remains a focus on the client.

Discussion

This article has analysed interaction on an online crisis helpline, which is a growing but understudied area of voluntary social work in the Nordic countries (e.g. Loga 2018). By demonstrating how volunteers use vague and/or general self-disclosures in activities focused on getting clients to do things, the analysis sheds light on previous contradictory findings. On the one hand, self-disclosures have been warned against because they can disrupt the progression of the interaction (McDaniel et al. 2007) and lead to role-reversal (e.g. Audet 2011; Mishara et al. 2007; Pudlinski 1998). On the other, volunteers talking about themselves is appreciated by clients (Middleton et al. 2016) and linked to improved mood and decreased suicidal ideation during calls (Mishara et al. 2007).

In relation to progression, the findings show disruptions in how counsellors invite emotional affiliation (Excerpt 1–2) and questions about themselves (Excerpt 3b, 4); instead of progressing projects focused on changing things for the clients, counsellors make relevant clients' responses to their offered stances (humorous/annoyance) and vague information. Self-disclosures are also part of posts that make possible, not necessary, courses of actions (Excerpt 4, 5). However, disrupting progression may be in the service of institutional goals: it relaxes helper-client roles in line with the helpline identity of being there as a fellow human rather than an expert. Previous research in other settings has shown that counsellors can de-prioritize progression of tasks in favour of providing clients with more leverage, for example by asking advice-implicative questions instead of providing advice (cf. Butler et al. 2010). The current study thus adds to research problematizing sharp distinctions between task-focus and sociability in institutional talk (e.g. Iversen et al. 2022) and shows that self-disclosures can be a resource for side-stepping an instrumental focus on getting clients to change (cf. Heinemann 2007; Stokoe 2009).

A problem related to progression in the current study, not mentioned in studies of self-disclosures in verbal interaction, was that they involved or made relevant long and complex turns. Although clients are prepared to wait in many cases (e.g. Excerpt 5), delay is a challenge in regards to suicide preventive communication where promptness and density has been shown to matter (Sindahl and van Dolen 2020). Without display of participants typing, volunteers may require training in preparing clients to wait. For example, Danby, Butler, and Emmison (2009) have shown that counsellors can project extended turns by starting with, 'My first thought when I read that . . . '. In a similar way, cases such as Excerpt 3b may require volunteers to signal that an answer is forthcoming but might take some time to formulate.

Related to the risk of role-reversal (Audet 2011; Pudlinski 1998), the analysis shows no examples where clients started to express sympathy for volunteers. A reason for this may be that the volunteers' self-disclosures are either on innocuous topics (Excerpt 1) or vague or general about experiences and talk about feelings (Excerpt 2, 3b, 4, 5). This makes the self-disclosures client-focused in several ways. First, non-specificity makes personal stories more likely to fit with the clients' experiences, not shifting focus from them (cf. Koskinen and Stevanovic 2022). Second, the vagueness describes rather than displays an experience, thereby reducing the relevance of clients showing sympathy for volunteers. Third, vagueness and generality makes room for clients to choose an interactional trajectory, for example to learn, agree, identify, or resist a topic or action (cf. Parry, Land, and Seymour 2014; Peyrot 1987; Iversen and Evaldsson 2020). An additional value of vagueness and generality is related to volunteers' safety: abuse from clients regularly occur on crisis helplines (cf. Pollock et al. 2012) and limiting volunteers' exposure is a way to protect them. Thus, being vague, general, and subtly focusing on lessons learned can be understood as a resource for accomplishing being personal while avoiding becoming private.

Self-disclosures might have specific affordances related to the online modality and suicide as a social problem. They are used to display knowledge, involvement and understanding (cf. Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar 2005; Ruusuvuori 2005), which can be difficult to communicate in chats without resources such as tone, emphasis, and breathing (Christensen, Frederiksen, and Madsen

2021; Sindahl and van Dolen 2020). In relation to suicide, which is a problem connected to uncertainty and impaired ability to see beyond the present (Ajdacic-Gross et al. 2019), self-disclosures from someone who has direct or mediated experience of suicidality may be particularly valuable – being someone who survived and is glad about it is in itself an argument against suicide. Thus, the current study shows that self-disclosures can be useful in crisis helpline chats for legitimately and cautiously sharing clients' situation. They can promote an equal relationship while also encouraging change by sharing and offering opportunities to learn.

Note

1. The numbers within brackets represent seconds between posts.

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