

## **Invoking the complainer's past transgressions: a practice for undermining complaints in therapeutic community meetings**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how a person who is the target of a complaint can undermine the moral entitlement of the complainer to issue that complaint. They do so by invoking the complainer's own past transgressions. By pointing out an incongruence between the complainer's current moral stance, as reflected in the complaint, and their status, as evidenced in their past conduct, speakers orient to an expectation of moral status/stance congruence as a basis for the validity of a complaint. My data consist of complaints and rebuttals collected from recorded group meetings within therapeutic communities for the treatment of people recovering from drug misuse. Data are in Italian with English translation.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I examine how speakers can undermine a complainer's moral entitlement to make a complaint. Using data from one institutional setting (therapeutic communities for people recovering from drug addiction) and building on a hint in a paper by Dersley and Wootton (2000), I will demonstrate that speakers can attempt to defeat a complaint by pointing out the complainer's own past transgressions.

Earlier conversation analytic research had identified problems that speakers face when responding to complaints. These problems differ depending on whether complaints are about absent and co-present persons (Pillet-Shore, 2015). Complaints about absent persons typically prefer affiliative responses (Drew & Walker, 2009), which entail 'siding' with the complainer against the target of the complaint. Recipients who wish to avoid doing so face the problem of how to withhold endorsement to the complaint whilst avoiding being heard as disagreeing with the complainer (Mandelbaum, 1991/1992). There are practices that complaint-recipients use to solve this problem.

Mandelbaum (1991/1992) shows that recipients can subtly disattend a complaint about an absent party by promoting the elaboration of another aspect of a complainer's talk. Holt (2012) shows that recipients can use laughter to "subtly resist further development of [a] complaint" (p. 446); through minimal and equivocal laughter, they can implicitly disaffiliate with the complaint. Holt concludes that these are "subtle ways in which recipients can maintain social concordance, and at the same time, avoid fully collaborating in a delicate activity" (Holt, 2012, p. 446).

Recipients face a different problem when it is *they* who are the target of the complaint. In these cases, to affiliate with the complainer is effectively an admission of fault, which recipients often act to avoid. How, then, to deal with the complaint? In a study of complaints within arguments, Dersley and Wootton (2000) found that responses to complaints vary on a continuum of (dis)affiliation. At the more affiliative end, recipients use so-called "not at fault" denials with which they implicitly confirm that the complained-of action took place, but they also justify it. At the more disaffiliative end, recipients fully reject the complaint through so-called "didn't do it" denials. In this study, I focus on another disaffiliative practice that Dersley and Wootton mention tantalisingly briefly: invoking the complainer's own past transgressions.

### 1.1. Invoking the complainer's past transgressions

Dersley and Wootton (2000) present two instances of a complaint recipient invoking the complainer's past transgressions. In one (their Extract 2, p. 382), a mother responds to her son's complaint that she hit him by saying "it was because you lie you know". Dersley and Wootton primarily focus on this as a not-at-fault denial whereby the recipient/target of a complaint tacitly admits to having committed a misbehaviour whilst also justifying it. They can do so by invoking either the complainer's own past behaviours (as in the mother's example) or other circumstances that would account for the complained-of conduct.

The other example provided in the same study (in extracts 11, p. 392, and 15, p. 397) is different. There, a wife accuses her husband of 'not knowing what family life is'. The husband (Dave) responds "'n' you do?"; he further accuses his wife through "you pissed off

when y'were sixteen (you total shit)". Unlike the mother's example, here the invocation of a complainer's past conduct is not done to justify the recipient/target's actions. "Dave's reply [...] does not directly deny the truth of what his wife is saying but *questions her capacity and authority to say it*" (Dersley & Wootton, 2000, p. 392, emphasis added); he invokes his wife's past behaviours in order to undermine her entitlement to complain about his conduct. Dersley and Wootton identify this action as a counter-complaint whereby "the recipient of the initial complaint declines to act as a complaine and attempts to turn the complainer into a complaine" (Dersley & Wootton, 2000, p. 402). This action is therefore disaligning (Stivers, 2008; also, Holt, 2012) as well as disaffiliative. Dersley and Wootton do not further elaborate on this phenomenon, which remains an isolated example in their paper. This phenomenon is the focus of the study I report here.

In this paper, I show that speakers can invoke a complainer's past transgressions in different ways, not exclusively through counter-complaints. In all cases, invoking a complainer's past actions is done to undermine their entitlement to issue that complaint. This practice is one amongst a number of solutions that speakers use to navigate the problem raised by complaints about their conduct. With this practice, speakers can tacitly or overtly admit to having committed the transgression attributed to them whilst opposing the complaint at the same time. They do so by contesting the complainer's moral entitlement to complain.

## 1.2. Practical ethics

Research in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis has shown that people orient to moral aspects of their own and others' actions in interaction (Heritage, 1984). For instance, they orient to entitlements to knowledge as moral matters (Stivers, Mondada & Steensig, 2011). I will show that speakers display moral concerns in their responses to other speakers' complaints. Following the lead from Whalen and Zimmerman's (1990) use of the expression "practical epistemology" (for how participants orient to aspects of knowledge in interaction, currently referred to as epistemics; Heritage, 2012) I use "practical ethics" for ways in which members' orientations to morality enter the organisation of their sequences of actions. Specifically, I propose that invoking a complainer's past transgressions undermines the validity of their complaint by highlighting an incongruence between their *moral stance*, as embodied in the complaint, and their *moral status*, as evidenced in their past behaviours.

Heritage (2012) introduced a distinction between speaker epistemic status and stance in his examination of knowledge imbalance as a driver of question-answer sequences. Status is a relative positioning whereby "persons recognize one another to be more or less knowledgeable concerning some domain of knowledge as a more or less settled matter of fact" (p. 32). Stance "concerns how speakers position themselves in terms of epistemic status in and through the design of turns at talk" (p. 33). Importantly, there can be congruence or incongruence between status and stance. Raymond (2016) applied the status/stance distinction to an examination of how persons index their identity by selecting different reference forms in their talk. In this article, I further extend the application of this analytic framework to examine speakers' moral status and stance. I propose that speakers orient to a fundamental congruence in moral status and stance as a basis for someone's entitlement to issue a complaint.

The study reported here advances our understanding of complaining as a social action by proposing that one of its constituent features is a moral status/stance congruence. When speakers contest a complainer's moral entitlement to issue a complaint, they convey the normative expectation that the complainer's moral status is congruent with the moral stance embodied in their complaint. Reflexively, exposing an incongruence at this level is a way of undermining the validity of the complaint.

## 2. Methods

The data for this study are recordings of facilitated group meetings within therapeutic communities (communities henceforth) for clients recovering from drug misuse. These communities are controlled environments; clients are not free to come and go as they please. Treatment is residential and lasts several months; staff members are present on a daily basis. Prolonged and close interpersonal contact presents members—staff and clients—with numerous opportunities to find others' behaviours offensive or inappropriate. Members regularly gather for house meetings where they can discuss concerns about each other's behaviours. Such discussions are an integral of the therapeutic process (Rapoport, 1959).

I collected the data in three communities in Italy in 2014 and 2015. The communities delivered residential or semi-residential rehabilitation involving work, educational, and leisure activities. Meetings between the clients and a number of staff members happened on a weekly basis. The staff members had a background in education, social work, or psychology. The clients had diagnoses of drug and/or alcohol addiction and, sometimes, mental health problems. The number of staff per meeting varied from 1 to 4; the number of clients from 3 to 16. Data consists of 24 audio or video-recorded meetings lasting 26 hours in total. Ethical approval for the collection of the data and its publication was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences of the University of Nottingham (E10042014 SoHS INTERACT).

The practice examined in this paper emerged whilst examining episodes provisionally identified as conflicts or disputes. 13 of these episodes contain 35 instances of members responding to a complaint by invoking the complainer's actions. In 12/35 cases, members point to a misdeed that the complainer has putatively just committed (within the ongoing interaction); in 23/35 cases they invoke the complainer's *past* transgressions. This paper focuses on these 23 cases (I hope to examine the other type of invocation in a future report). Conversation analysis is my approach to transcription and analysis.

Transcripts include the original language (Italian), an interlinear gloss (abbreviations are explained in the Appendix), and an English idiomatic translation. Participants gave written informed consent to publish the transcripts and images. Notation of body behaviour follows Mondada's (2014) conventions. Names are pseudonyms.

## 3. Findings

In the sequences I examine, a community member complains about the conduct of one or more other members. They attribute a transgression—the violation of a social norm—to other members, and point to the attendant offence brought to the complainer and/or the community.



- c-dar: ---->+looks up at Grazia--->
- 06 C-Dar: Se fosse sta' ↑mi non gavarìa neanche  
if be-SBJ.3S be-PSTP 1S.N not have-CND.1S even  
**If it had been ↑me I would not have even**
- 07 +↑chiesto de andare per (bere) +andare  
ask-PSTP of go-INF for (drink-INF) go-INF  
**+↑asked to go to (have) +to go**  
->+looks across the table-----+looks at Gra->1.9
- 08 a berme un caffè.  
to drink-INF.RFL.1S a coffee.  
**to have a coffee.**
- 09 (2.3)+(0.3)  
c-dar: --->+looks at Paolo--->>
- 10 C-Dar: ↑O [no.  
or no  
**↑Right?**

Paolo orients to this complaint by starting to speak in overlap (line 11, below). This is our target phenomenon: he counters the complaint by invoking Dario's own past transgressions (by the ironic rhetorical question “and you never ask to have a coffee when you go out” (lines 11-12)).

Extract 1b (continues immediately from 1a)

- 11 C-Pao: -> [E non te domande ↑mai de bevare  
and not SCL.2S ask-2S never of drink-INF  
**And you ↑never ask to have**
- 12 il caffè co te va fora ( [ )  
the coffee when SCL.2S go-2S out  
**coffee when you go out ( )**
- 13 C-Dar: [Ghe ho go chiesto  
3P.D have-1S have-1S ask-PSTP  
**I asked them**
- 14 anca ↑prima mi in furgo::[:n ( )  
also earlier 1S.N in van  
**even ↑earlier in the van**

Paolo invokes the fact that Dario commits the same transgression that Dario has attributed to Paolo; that is, Dario also asks to drink coffee when he goes out (lines 11-12). This turn is designed as a “reversed polarity interrogative” (Koshik, 2017), namely, an interrogative conveying a corresponding assertion of opposite polarity (‘you ((Dario)) ask to have coffee when you go out’); it challenges Dario to say that he has never asked for coffee whilst implying

that he has. Paolo makes this point by exploiting and contradicting Dario's claim that he would not have engaged in the complained-of action (lines 6-8).

Paolo's invocation of Dario's past transgression (lines 11-12) is disaffiliative; it challenges Dario's entitlement to complain on the basis that Dario has committed the same transgression that he has attributed to Paolo. This is therefore a counter-complaint (as defined by Dersley and Wootton, 2000). Paolo's response is also disaligning; he resists addressing a complaint about his own conduct and, rather, refocuses the talk on Dario's past transgressions. This analysis is supported by Dario's response (lines 13-14).

Lines 13-14 is Dario's entire response. It is overlapped by Paolo's next turn (shown in Extract 2), which makes Dario's talk indistinguishable in the recording after "furgon"/"van". Dario confirms that he asked to drink coffee in the past. However, his response is not an admission of fault; it is a defensive response which resists Paolo's counter-complaint. In the data as a whole, I find that clients recurrently respond to complaints about their transgressions with partial confirmations followed by specifications, whose function is to resist the complaint (see Extract 4, lines 17-19). There is evidence that Dario is starting this trajectory here. He volunteers the detail that he has asked for coffee more than once ("even earlier" on the same day; possibly during the same trip where the complained-of incident has taken place). Dario mentions that he made that request "in the van"—the vehicle with which the staff take the clients out; that is, at a time where the clients and the staff were travelling together. With this, Dario suggests that he made his request openly and on behalf of the clients who had joined the trip; this contrasts with the way in which Paolo asked for a coffee, that is, just for his own benefit and without consideration for the other clients. Dario implies that *his* request—unlike Paolo's request—was legitimate. With this defensive response, Dario resists Paolo's counter-complaint (lines 11-12) and concurrently exhibits an orientation to its disaffiliative nature.

Dario's response also supports the proposal that the focal practice (lines 11-12) is disaligning. His response exhibits his understanding that Paolo has shifted the focus of the talk from Paolo's to Dario's (the complainer's) own behaviours. Additionally, later in their exchange (shown in Extract 3) Dario shifts the focus back to Paolo's past transgressions in a way that is resonant with the initial complaint about coffee. In this way, Dario treats Paolo's line of action as interfering with his (Dario's) original project of building a case against Paolo (hence, as disaligning).

In the next sections, I offer evidence that invoking a complainer's past transgressions is a way of undermining their complaint by challenging their moral entitlement to issue that complaint. First, I provide additional support for the analysis of the focal practice in Extract 1 (involving two clients). Second, I show that staff members use this practice with the same function. Third, I show that community members also use the focal practice non-adjacently; in these cases, its use renews the relevance of a complaint later in the interaction. Finally, I support the proposal that the focal practice is used to denounce an incongruence between the complainer's moral status and stance.

### 3.1 Undermining the complainer's moral entitlement

In this section I offer evidence that group members use the focal practice to undermine the complainer's *moral entitlement* to issue a complaint. I start by rejecting an alternative analysis

of the focal practice in Extract 1 (lines 11-12); that is, the possibility that it does not undermine Dario's moral entitlement to complain but, rather, implements a normalising account which nullifies the complainability of the criticised behaviour altogether. Paolo could be proposing that, since Dario also asks to drink coffee when he goes out, this should be considered as acceptable conduct<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, the analysis I support is that Paolo does not oppose the treatment of his own behaviour as complainable but, rather, undermines Dario's entitlement to complain about it. I support this in two ways; by examining the subsequent unfolding of the interaction in Extract 1 and other cases where members use also invoke complainers' past transgressions. In all cases, they do so to challenge the complainer's moral standing and, on this basis, their entitlement to complain.

Extract 2 shows the continuation of the exchange between Dario and Paolo seen in Extract 1 (lines 13 and 14 are repeated). Paolo disattends Dario's response to the focal practice (lines 13-14) and, in overlap, produces another complaint about Dario (lines 15-17). I focus on the implications of this additional complaint for the analysis of Paolo's overall interactional project and use of the focal practice in Extract 1 (lines 11-12).

Extract 2 (continues from Extract 1b; lines 13-14 repeated)

- 13 C-Dar: [Ghe ho go chiesto  
3P.D have-1S have-1S ask-PSTP  
**I asked them**
- 14 anca ↑prima mi in furgo::[:n ( )  
also earlier 1S.N in van  
**even ↑earlier in the van**
- 15 C-Pao: -> [E lunedì chi è sta'  
and Monday who be-3S be-PSTP  
**And on Monday who said**
- 16 -> a dirghe in furgo:n "quel là ga sempre  
to say-INF=3P.D in van that.one there have-3S always  
**in the van "that one always gets to**
- 17 -> da vegner ↑via qua e là"?  
to come-INF away here and there  
**go out and all that"?**

At lines 15-17, Paolo uses another interrogative (see Extract 1, lines 11-12) to convey the complaint that Dario bad-mouthed him. This complaint is not responsive to Dario's defence at lines 13 and 14. Rather, it extends the line of complaint started at lines 11-12. This new complaint—that Dario bad-mouthed Paolo—portrays Dario as biased against Paolo; it counters Dario's initial line of complaint (about the coffee, in Extract 1) by undermining his credibility as a complainer. Additionally, it forcefully pursues the project of shifting the focus of the talk to Dario's misbehaviours. This suggests—although retrospectively—that Paolo used the focal

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<sup>1</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for proposing this alternative analysis.



practice in Extract 1 to implement the same kind of project: undermining Dario's moral entitlement to complaint rather than normalising the complained-of conduct. An additional supporting argument is that the basis for Dario's complaint was that Paolo disregarded the other clients' lack of access to coffee. There is no indication that Paolo supports the view that it is acceptable to ignore other clients' needs in order to pursue one's own interests. Rather, Paolo's invocation of Dario's past misbehaviours appears to be in the service of discrediting Dario *as a complainer*.

A second source of support for my analysis comes from the other cases where community members invoke the complainer's past conduct. Clients invoke complainers' past transgressions to undermine their entitlement to complain, whilst leaving the characterisation of the transgression intact. They convey that the complainer's moral outlook is such that they do not have the right to 'cast the first stone'. Extract 3—a continuation of the exchange between Dario and Paolo in extracts 1 and 2—illustrates this.

Extract 3 happens twenty seconds after the end of Extract 2, at the end of which Paolo complained that Dario had bad-mouthed him. In the omitted section between extracts 2 and 3, Dario claimed that Paolo goes out often and that he should allow other clients to go out instead. In terms of context, community staff occasionally take some clients with them when they go out for errands. Dario has construed this as a privilege and has complained that it is unequally distributed—with Paolo having more access to it than other clients. The nature of this complaint is resonant with Dario's complaint about Paolo in Extract 1 (lines 5-8). In the omitted section, Paolo has opposed the new complaint by claiming that he actually gave up going out on several occasions. Paolo extends this defence in Extract 3, lines 1-2, below. Dario subsequently exploits Paolo's argument in order to raise another complaint about Paolo (lines 3-4); when Paolo stayed in, he took advantage of the situation to obtain from the staff yet another privilege—extra cigarettes (another regulated and limited good in the community). Dario's turn elects Paolo as recipient and target of the complaint, hence placing an expectation on him to respond. After Paolo does not respond at lines 5 and 6, Dario adds an increment (line 7) whilst looking at Paolo, thereby pursuing a response from him. Paolo then opposes Dario's complaint through another instance of the focal practice (line 8); he invokes the fact that Dario was involved in the transgression as a beneficiary (Paolo gave Dario some of those extra cigarettes). Analysis of the focal practice follows the extract. A note on line 5: another client addresses a staff member seating next to him; he is not intervening in the conversation between Dario and Paolo.

#### Extract 3 (later in same meeting as extracts 1-2) IntG7 3:39

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01 Pao:      [Son sta'      casa anca il giorno %↑dopo] son
              be-1S stay-PSTP home also the day      after be-1S
              I stayed at home the next day as well I
              >>looks at Dario--->>
dar:         >>looks in front across table----%looks at Pao--->1.3

02          sta'      casa.
              stay-PSTP home
              stayed in.
```

- 03 Dar:            ↑Si: %non te    ga'            vossùo neanca sigarette  
                  yes   not 2S.SCL have-2S   want-PSTP even       cigarettes  
                  ↑**Yes you didn't even want cigarettes**  
                              %looks in front across table-->1.8
- 04                    da ↑Ro [bby.  
                          from NAME  
                          **from ↑Robby<sup>2</sup>.**
- 05 Gui:                       [ (       ) adesso. ((to the staff member at his left))  
  now  
  (       ) **now.**
- 06                    (0.4)
- 07 Dar:            Se [xe par quello.  
                          if be-3S for that  
                          **For that matter.**
- 08 Pao: ->           [Pa:ssartela    a %↑ti (seto)?  
                          pass-INF=2S.D=3S.A to 2S.A   know-2S  
                          **((To)) pass it to you (you know)?**  
          dar:   %looks at Paolo--->>
- 09                    (0.4)
- 10 Pao:            E[cco  
                          here  
                          **There you go.**
- 11 Dar:            [(Ma) t<sub>i</sub>       non sta       preoccuparte par mi.  
                          (but) 2S.N       not stay-IMP.2S worry-INF=RFL.2S for 1S.A  
                          **You don't worry about me.**

Paolo invokes Dario's past transgressions at line 8. This instance presents a difference compared to Extract 1. In Extract 1, Paolo invokes the fact that Dario has independently committed the same transgression that he has attributed to Paolo. In Extract 3, Paolo co-implicates Dario as a beneficiary of the transgression which Paolo committed. The outcome is the same. Paolo does not normalise the behaviour that Dario has attributed to him; he does not propose that obtaining a privilege, to which other clients do not have access, is normal or acceptable. Rather, he publicises—in the group meeting, at the presence of the staff—the fact that Dario has engaged in illicit conduct (i.e., obtaining cigarettes from another client, which is forbidden in the community). The move is retaliatory rather than justificatory. Crucially, by co-implicating Dario as a beneficiary of the transgression, Paolo undermines Dario's entitlement to complain about it. Paolo's action is therefore disaffiliative. Additionally, it is disaligning insofar as it focuses on Dario's past behaviours at a point where Paolo is expected to address a complaint about his own behaviours. This is supported by Dario's response—an admonishment for Paolo 'not to worry about' Dario's business (line 11); this evidences Dario's

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<sup>2</sup> An absent staff member.

treatment of Paolo's turn as shifting the focus to Dario's behaviours, as well as negatively sanctioning this shift.

To summarise, community clients invoke complainers' past behaviours in ways that variously challenge their entitlement to issue a particular complaint; for example, because they have been found guilty of the same type of transgression in the past (Extract 1) or because they have been co-implicated in the transgression they have attributed to the other client (Extract 3). The next section focuses on staff members' use of the focal practice.

### 3.2. Staff members' invocation of clients' past transgressions

This section focuses on community staff members' invocation of clients' past transgressions in response to those clients' complaints. Extract 4 illustrates this. In terms of context, before Extract 4, the community members have discussed an episode where an absent member nailed a client's (Denis) cap to a fence, apparently as a joke. Sandro (staff) has invited the clients to avoid making jokes. Sandro has issued a hypothetical example where he addresses a joke to another staff member, and that staff member finds it offensive; Sandro has said that, in that circumstance, he would apologise and avoid making jokes in the future (data not shown). Denis's turn at lines 1-2 of Extract 4 is parasitic on Sandro's example. "The same thing applies to me" (lines 1-2), means that Denis found himself in the same situation as the staff member who was the victim of a bad joke in Sandro's hypothetical example. In other words, "the same thing applies to me" is a complaint that another community member nailed Denis's cap to a fence and that nothing has been done to redress that offence.

Denis's complaint is as much about the community member who nailed his cap to a fence as it is about Sandro for not defending Denis (for example, by reprimanding the offender), although the latter aspect is tacitly conveyed and only unpacked later in the meeting<sup>3</sup>. With his complaint, Denis pursues recognition of his status as a victim and of his entitlement to compensation. In Extract 4, Sandro firmly rejects this claim of entitlement (lines 3 and 5). Following Denis's re-affirmation of his entitlement (line 6), Sandro invokes Denis's past transgressions (line 7)—this is an instance of the focal practice. Analysis follows the extract. The start of Denis's response is shown at lines 17-19.

Extract 4 – IntL8 00:00 "Cap". Members speaking: client Denis (C-Den); Staff member Sandro (S-San). There are thirteen other clients and two other staff members in the meeting.

01 C-Den:            [Si ma San<sup>↑</sup>dro l:a stessa cosa  
                          yes but NAME            the same thing  
                          **Yes but Sandro the same thing**

02                    vale per me? (.)  
                          count-3S for me

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<sup>3</sup> Denis pursues his complaint several times later in the meeting (data not shown). It is in the context of one of these pursuits that Denis criticises Sandro for not intervening in the reported episode. Denis does so by enacting the sort of response that Sandro could have appropriately implemented to defend him: "you could have told him ((i.e., the member who nailed Denis's cap to a fence)) 'what the fuck are you doing I mean leave him ((i.e., me/Denis)) alone'".

**applies to me? (.)**

03 S-San: NO?=  
no  
**NO?=-**

04 C-Den: =il fatto che: S[i?  
the fact that yes  
**=the fact tha:t Yes?**

05 S-San: [No?=  
no  
**No?=-**

06 C-Den: =↑Si[:.  
yes  
**=↑Yes.**

07 S-San: -> [Si<sup>4</sup> (te o dico [m'hai) urlato così,  
if (2S.D 3S.A tell-1S 1S.D=have-2S) shout-PSTP so  
**(I tell you you) shouted at me like that,**

08 C-Den: [Si.  
yes  
**Yes.**

09 S-San: non ↑c'era possibilità? (0.4) de riprendere.  
not EX=be-IPF.3S possibility to re-take  
**it was not possible? (0.4) to talk.**

((omitted: Sandro further says that Denis's reaction made it impossible to talk to him, particularly because guests were present at the community at that time))

17 C-Den: [Eh sì ci rimane ↑male. Ma quello l'ho capito  
PTC yes SCL stay-3S badly but that 3S.A=have-1S understand-PSTP  
**Right okay they can feel hurt by it. I got that**

18 che va be:: cioè il mio è: un mio un difetto  
that alright I.mean the my be-3S a my a shortcoming  
**because okay I mean I I have this shortcoming**

19 quello di avere magari reazioni sbagliate  
that of have-INF maybe reactions wrong  
**that maybe I overreact**

At lines 7 and 9, Sandro invokes Denis's inappropriate reaction within the reported event. Compared to the previous cases, the misbehaviour invoked by Sandro stands in a different relationship to the complaint (i.e., Denis's complaint that another member nailed his cap to a

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<sup>4</sup> Readers with knowledge of Italian will notice that some of Sandro's morpho-syntax departs from standard Italian. In this case, "se" would be correct, translated as "if", but Sandro says "si". This is because Sandro is a non-native, albeit extremely fluent speaker of Italian.

fence). Sandro does not attribute to Denis the same misbehaviour that Denis has attributed to another member (see, for contrast, Extract 1), nor does he co-implicate Denis as a beneficiary of that misbehaviour (see, for contrast, Extract 3). Sandro invokes the fact that Denis had a disproportionate and unreasonable reaction to the offence. The effect is the same as in the previous cases. By invoking Denis's reaction, Sandro does not contest that the complained-of action was an offence; he does not nullify its complainability, as evidenced by the fact that he has already invited the clients to avoid such 'jokes' (data summarised previously). Rather, Sandro undermines Denis's entitlement to complain on the basis that he overreacted at the time of the reported event.

The design of Sandro's invocation of Denis's past misconduct is specifically fitted to the nature of the complaint, and to the relevant relationship between Sandro and Denis that this complaint activates. Sandro is the staff member who was present at the time of the complained-of incident and Denis's complaint focuses on the fact that Sandro did not intervene in his defence. At line 9, Sandro claims that Denis's aggressive reaction (described at line 7) made it impossible for him (Sandro) to intervene. Therefore, Sandro's invocation of Denis's inappropriate reaction to the offence (lines 7 and 9) undermines Denis's entitlement to claim the status of a victim and to expect an intervention in his defence.

Another difference with the previous cases is that Sandro does not use the focal practice adjacently, that is, immediately after Denis's complaint. He first rejects Denis's claim (lines 3 and 5) and only invokes Denis's past behaviours after Denis opposes this rejection (lines 7 and 9). In doing so, Sandro still displays an orientation to the focal practice as a practice he can relevantly use in order to deal with Denis's complaint.

Sandro's invocation of Denis's past conduct is a disaffiliative response to the complaint because it undermines Denis's entitlement to complain. It is also disaligning; it refocuses the talk on Denis's misbehaviours at a point where Denis has raised a complaint about another member's misbehaviours. It also proposes a shift in Denis's relevant identity: from victim to transgressor. This analysis is supported by Denis's response (lines 17-19); he aligns to Sandro's focus on his (Denis's) behaviours by admitting his reactions may have upset those who witnessed them ("they" at line 17). He also admits that he sometimes has overreactions (lines 18-19). However, in a pattern similar to the one found across extracts 1 and 3, Denis re-implements his complaint (in Extract 5 below). In this way, he treats Sandro's invocation of his own misbehaviours as interfering with or deviating from his own project—hence, as disaligning.

Extract 5 below is a continuation of the exchange shown in Extract 4. After admitting that he sometimes overreacts (part of this response having been omitted for space considerations), Denis re-implements his initial project. He issues another complaint about the absent member who nailed his cap to a fence (lines 21-22). With this, Denis pursues recognition of his status as a victim. He further supports his position through a contrastive claim that he would not engage in the complained-of conduct (lines 24-28). Sandro builds on this claim to contest Denis's position (lines 29-31). Sandro's "Come"—literally "how", idiomatically translated as "What do you mean"—challenges Denis's claim. Sandro does not wait for a response and expands his turn by producing another instance of the focal practice (lines 29-31). Analysis follows the extract.

Extract 5 (continues from Extract 4)

((omitted: Denis admits that sometimes he has overreactions))

- 21 C-Den: Però: (e) (.) è il fatto che m non >cioè<  
but (be-3S) be-3S the fact that not I.mean  
**But (.) it's the fact that m ((he didn't)) >I mean<**
- 22 per dirti non si è neanche scu↑sato. (.)  
to tell-INF=2S.D not RFL.3S be-3S even apolosise-PSTP.  
**just to say that he didn't even apologise.**
- 23 Perché io comunque anche se noi siamo amici  
because I anyway even if 1P.N be-1P friends  
**Because anyway I (.) although we are friends**
- 24 per quello che ↑siamo, cioè io non mi permetterei mai  
for what that be-3P I.mean 1S.N not RFL.1S allow-CND.1S never  
**so to speak, I mean I would never take the liberty of**
- 25 neanche di: (.) toccarti una sigar↑retta  
not.even to touch-INF=2S.D a cigarette  
**touching even one of your cigarettes**
- 26 o di di di fare (un:)/(m:) di farti spostarti  
or to to to do-INF (a)/(PTC) to do-INF=2S.D move-INF=2S.D  
**or to to to do (a:)/(m:) to do you to move**
- 27 una ciabatta o di fare qualche  
a slipper or to do-INF some  
**one of your slippers or to do some**
- 28 cazzata del ↑ge[nere].  
bullshit of=the sort  
**bullshit like that.**
- 29 S-San: -> [(Come.) Ma se io ti avevo richiamato  
(how) but if 1S.N 2S.D have-IPF.1S tell.off-PSTP  
**(What do you mean.) I had**
- 30 un sacco de ↑volte perché prendevi le cose  
a sackful of times because take-IPF.2S the things  
**pulled you up many times because you had taken**
- 31 degli altri.  
of=the others  
**other people's things.**
- 32 (0.4)
- 33 S-San: ↑Come non te perme[tti ( )  
how not RFL.2S allow-2S  
**What do you mean you don't take the liberty ( )**

34 C-Den: [È successo una ↑volta che  
be-3S happen-PSTP one time that  
**It happened once after**

35 sono arri↑vato,  
be-1S arrive-PSTP  
**I arrived,**

Sandro invokes the fact that Denis appropriated other people's belongings in the past (lines 29-31). In this way, Sandro directly opposes Denis's claim at lines 24-28—a claim that Denis has made in support of his complaint. Sandro does not normalise the complained-of conduct; by reporting that he reproached Denis (lines 29-31) he conveys that it is not acceptable to appropriate other members' belongings. Sandro undermines Denis's entitlement to complain on the basis that he has committed the same transgression. This invocation of Denis's past conduct is of the same type as Paolo's invocation of Dario's past behaviours (that he also requests coffee) in Extract 1—a counter-complaint (as defined by Dersley and Wootton, 2000). Another similarity is that, in both cases, the recipient of the complaint attributes multiple past transgressions to the complainer (see Extract 1, lines 11-12 and Extract 2, lines 15-17; in the case under examination, Extract 4, lines 7 and 9, and Extract 5, lines 29-31). This supports the proposal that Sandro has embarked in a project of undermining Denis's entitlement to complain.

As in the previous cases, the invocation of the complainer's past behaviours is not only disaffiliative; it is also disaligning. Denis's response at lines 34-35 supports this; he treats Sandro's turn as a complaint about him (Denis) by reporting an extenuating circumstance, minimising the magnitude of the transgression that Sandro has invoked<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, later in the meeting Denis re-implements his project through another version of his initial complaint (data not shown; see footnote 3). By doing so, Denis treats Sandro's invocation of his past transgressions as interfering with his (Denis's) interactional project (hence, as disaligning).

### 3.3. Invoking the complainer's transgression later in a meeting

Community members can invoke a complainer's past transgressions non-adjacently, that is, later in the group meeting. In this way, the invocation of a past transgression reactivates the relevance of a complaint later. In the case examined here, a client (Luciano) produces a list of complaints—some about specific clients, some about the entire clients group. The other clients wait until Luciano has finished and then start to respond to some of Luciano's complaints. Extracts 6 and 7 show one of Luciano's complaints (Extract 6) and a client's response to it (Extract 7). This response is done later (4,5 minutes after Extract 6) and is an instance of the focal practice.

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<sup>5</sup> Denis says that it happened once, after he had been admitted to the community (lines 34-35), which may suggest that, as a newcomer, he was not fully aware of the rules; in data not shown, he goes on to admit that he appropriated an item belonging to a client called Adamo, and then Sandro contradicts him by reporting that Denis had appropriated other clients' belongings as well.

In Extract 6, Luciano claims that Paolo (client) smoked in the bathroom (lines 1-5), which is forbidden according to community regulations. This complaint targets Paolo. Unfortunately, a video is not available for this segment (only the audio is available for the first ten minutes of this meeting; the video is available for Extract 7). Therefore, I do not know whether Luciano is looking at Paolo here. However, it seems plausible that the complaint is not addressed to a specific recipient at this point but, rather, designed for the whole group (clients and staff) to hear. In support of this, Luciano refers to Paolo in the third person (lines 3-4). Another feature of this complaint is that it is embedded in an utterance where Luciano justifies the fact that he had reported Paolo's transgression (smoking in the bathroom) to a member of staff (Gianni, mentioned at line 2).

Extract 6 – IntG4 4:04 “Cigarettes” (audio only). Client speaking: Luciano (C-Luc). There are fifteen other clients and four staff members in the meeting.

- 01 C-Luc:        se io ho        notato        quel che ho no↑tato (4.1)  
if 1S.N have.1S notice-PSTP what that 1S.N notice-PSTP  
**if I noticed what I noticed (4.1)**
- 02                se ↑io ho        detto a Gianni (.) il fatto del:: (0.2)  
if 1S.N have.1S say-PSTP to NAME        the fact of.the-S  
**if ↑I told Gianni (.) about the (0.2)**
- 03                delle sigarette: (.) che: della sigaretta che stava  
of.the cigarettes        that of.the cigarettes that stay-IPF.3S  
**about the cigarettes (.) tha:t about the cigarette that**
- 04                fumando Paolo in bagno (0.6) è perché in quel  
smoke-GER NAME in bathroom        be.3S because in that  
**Paolo was smoking in the bathroom (0.6) it's because at that**
- 05                momento non ritenevo giusto  
moment not deem-IPF.1S right  
**time I thought it was not right ((continues))**

Later in the meeting, after some clients have already responded to elements of Luciano's list of complaints (data not shown), Massimo (client) addresses Luciano's complaint reproduced in Extract 6. This is shown in Extract 7 below. With “regarding the cigarettes” (line 1) Massimo connects his intervention to Luciano's complaint in Extract 6, which was the only reference to cigarettes in Luciano's list of complaints. By explicitly connecting his contribution to a specific part of Luciano's extended turn, Massimo displays an orientation to his contribution as being produced later in the meeting, rather than adjacently after Luciano's complaint, and as reactivating the relevance of that complaint. Additionally, Massimo orients to the accountability of intervening in a circumstance where he is not the target of the complaint, nor its selected recipient. First, he asks Luciano whether he can intervene (line 1). Second, when he responds to Luciano's complaint, Massimo construes himself as co-responsible for the complained-of transgression—he also smoked in the bathroom (lines 4-5)—thereby displaying an epistemic basis for commenting upon that transgression. This is also an instance of the focal



practice; Massimo invokes the fact that Luciano committed the same transgression that he has attributed to another client. Extract 7 comprises some of the ensuing interaction to show how the focal practice is treated by Paolo (target of the initial complaint; lines 8, 11 and 14) and Massimo himself (lines 16 and 18-19). Analysis of the focal practice and of these subsequent turns follows the extract.

Extract 7 – IntG4 “Cigarettes” (4.5 minutes after Extract 6). Three clients speaking: Luciano, Massimo and Paolo (C-Luc, C-Mas, C-Pao). There are thirteen other clients and four staff members in the meeting.

- 01 C-Mas: Eh posso dire. <A proposito delle sigarette.  
PTC can-1S say-INF in regard of.the cigarettes  
**Right can I speak. <Regarding the cigarettes.**  
c-luc: >>looks down--->1.5
- 02 (.)
- 03 C-Luc: Mm mm?  
PTC PTC  
**Mm mm?**
- 04 C-Mas: -> Quante volte è su<sup>↑</sup>ccesso che: noi dopo il film  
how.many times be-3S happen-PSTP that 1P.N after the film  
**How many times has it happened that after the film**
- 05 tornavamo: su, a fumarci l'ultima +siga%retta,  
go.back-IPF.1P up to smoke-INF=RLF.1P the=last cigarette  
**we would go upstairs, and smoke the last +ciga%rette,**  
c-luc: +looks at Mas->1.7  
c-luc: %nods
- 06 C-Luc: %S-s:i.%  
yes  
%Y-ye:s.%  
c-luc: %nods---%
- 07 C-Mas: +e [quando ( )  
and when  
**+and when**  
c-luc: +looks down--->1.18
- 08 C-Pao: [↑In ↓ba:gno.  
in bathroom  
**↑In ↓the bathroom.**
- 09 C-Mas: In [bagno.  
in bathroom  
**In the bathroom.**
- 10 C-Luc: [%↑Si:.%  
yes  
**↑Yes.**

- %nods-%
- 11 C-Pao:           ↑In [↓bagno.  
                  in     bathroom  
                  ↑In ↓the bathroom.
- 12 C-Mas:           [Tu-  
                  all  
                  **All-**
- 13 C-Mas:           Tutte le [volte ( )  
                  all     the times  
                  **Every time ( )**
- 14 C-Pao:                           [↑Una trentina di↑ ↓volte.  
  a     about.thirty of     times  
  ↑About thir↑ty ↓times.
- 15                   (0.2)
- 16 C-Mas:           Tu[tte le volte ti dicevo   `andiamo=  
                  all     the times 2S.D say-IPF.1S go-IMP.1S  
                  **Every time I would tell you `let's go=**
- 17 C-Pao:           [E:h.  
                  PTC  
                  **Ri:ght.**
- 18 C-Mas:           =+fuori a fuma:re" qua e là. E te  
                  out     to smoke-INF here and there and 2S.N  
                  =+and smoke outside" and all that. And you  
c-luc:           +looks up at Mas--->>
- 19                   fumavi         in bagno.  
                  smoke-IPF.2S in bathroom  
                  **would smoke in the bathroom.**

Massimo implements the focal practice through a reversed polarity interrogative (see Extract 1) conveying the assertion that he and Luciano smoked “upstairs”, where it is forbidden, many times (lines 4-5). Although Massimo co-implicates himself in the transgression (“we”), his action is taken by Paolo—target of Luciano’s complaint—as building a case against Luciano. Paolo intervenes to upgrade the accusatory aspect of Massimo’s action; he specifies that Luciano smoked “in the bathroom” (lines 8 and 11) many times (line 14). Paolo’s animated intonation—represented through upward and downward arrows—can be heard as accusatory. Massimo’s and Paolo’s emphasis on the number of times in which Luciano smoked in the bathroom is crucial here. By invoking the number of times in which Luciano committed the same transgression that he has attributed to another client (Paolo), the clients portray Luciano has having malicious intentions towards Paolo in producing this complaint (see also the analysis of Extract 2). If Luciano committed the same transgression many times and saw other clients do so too without reporting it, his decision to only report Paolo’s transgression can be seen as motivated by the intent to specifically damage Paolo’s reputation. This contradicts

Luciano's claim that he reported Paolo's transgression because he thought that Paolo's behaviour "was not right" (Extract 6, line 5). Therefore, Massimo's exposure of Luciano's past conduct undermines his credibility as a complainer<sup>6</sup>.

Massimo does not invoke Luciano's past conduct to normalise the complained-of transgression. This is supported by Massimo's upgrading of the complaint about Luciano at lines 16 and 18-19. By reporting that he tried to persuade Luciano not to smoke in the bathroom, Massimo characterises that conduct as reprehensible or at least sanctionable. Massimo invokes the fact that Luciano smoked in the bathroom in order to undermine his entitlement to judge other clients for doing so. In summary, Extract 7 shows that community members can use the focal practice later in a meeting by reactivating the relevance of a complaint. The function of the practice is the same as in the previous examples examined in this paper.

### 3.3 Moral status and stance

In this section I propose that community members undermine complainers' entitlement to complain by evidencing an incongruence between their moral stance, namely a claim of moral authority and credibility embodied in the complaint, and status, namely the complainer's moral outlook as testified by their past behaviours. Community members thereby orient to a fundamental congruence between moral status and stance as the basis for a member's entitlement to complain about others. By denouncing a status/stance incongruence, they undermine the complainer's moral authority, and hence their entitlement to complain.

In some cases, community members attribute to a complainer the same transgression that the complainer has attributed to someone else. In Extract 1, Paolo turns a complaint about asking for extra coffee against the client (Dario) who has attributed the same transgression to him. In Extract 5, Sandro invokes the fact that Denis appropriated other clients' possessions—the same transgression that Denis has complained about. In Extract 7, Massimo attributes to Luciano the same transgression he has attributed to another client—smoking in the bathroom. These community members expose a contradiction between the moral stance embodied in the complaint and the moral status evidenced in the complainer's past behaviours. By invoking these behaviours, community members orient to the congruence between the complainer's moral stance and status as a necessary basis for the validity of their complaint; they implement a norm whereby one is not entitled to judge others for something of which they have also been found guilty. Reflexively, community members exploit an incongruence between the complainer's moral status and stance to undermine their complaint.

By denouncing a moral status/stance incongruence, community members bring to the surface a tacit, and therefore ordinarily unnoticed, constituent element of complaints. By producing a complaint, a speaker can be taken to tacitly claim that they have not themselves engaged in the complained-of conduct and, more generally, that they have a moral status that allows them to cast judgment on others. This is, after all, a version of the Golden Rule—the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated. In some cases, this aspect is conveyed overtly rather than tacitly: complainers can portray themselves as righteous, well-

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<sup>6</sup> This aspect is extensively discussed in discursive psychology as a dilemma of stake (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

meaning or well-behaved in an attempt to support their complaint. In Extract 1, Dario claims that he would not have engaged in the transgression he is attributing to Paolo (lines 6-8). Paolo denounces an incongruence between the moral stance embodied in that claim and Dario's moral status as evidenced in his past behaviours (lines 11-12). In Extract 5, Denis claims that he would never appropriate other clients' belongings and contrasts this with the way in which another client has treated him (line 23-28). Sandro denounces an incongruence between the moral stance embodied in that claim and Denis's moral status—based on knowledge of Denis's past behaviours (lines 29-31). In these cases, there is an orientation from both the complainer and the recipient of that complaint to a moral status/stance congruence as the basis for one's entitlement to complain. Countering a claim to moral integrity carries the additional implication of exposing that claim as a possible lie.

There are other ways in which community members denounce a moral status/stance incongruence. In Extract 3, Paolo co-implicates Dario as a beneficiary of the transgression he has attributed to Paolo. In this way Paolo points to an incongruence between Dario's moral status, as evidenced in his benefitting from Paolo's transgression, and the moral stance embodied in Dario's complaint. In Extract 4, Sandro attributes another transgression to Denis, different from the one that Denis has reported. Sandro denounces the fact that Denis reacted inappropriately at the time of the complained-of offence. This invocation of Denis's reaction channels Sandro's assumption that, if one reacts inappropriately, they lose the entitlement to complain, to claim the attendant status of victim, and to expect compensation. In all these cases, invoking a complainer's past conduct is done to expose an incongruence between their moral status and the moral stance embodied in their complaint. With this practice, community members do not contest that an offence has taken place or that it should be treated as an offence. They undermine the complainer's moral entitlement to denounce that offence.

#### **4. Discussion**

I have examined a practice whereby therapeutic community members invoke a complainer's past transgressions in order to undermine their entitlement to make a complaint. This analysis reveals speakers' treatment of complaints as actions that mobilise moral considerations. Specifically, they treat others' complaints as conveying claims to moral authority and to the attendant right to judge others' deeds. The practice of invoking a complainer's past transgressions is revealing in this respect because it selectively addresses this constituent of complaints and thereby isolates it from other constituents. By invoking a complainer's past transgressions, community members do not contest the claim that the complained-of conduct was indeed reprehensible or sanctionable (see, for contrast, normalizing accounts; Pino & Mortari, 2013), nor do they contest that it happened (see, for contrast, "didn't do it" denials; Dersley & Wootton, 2000)—both these claims being other constituents of complaints. Rather, invoking a complainer's past transgressions undermines the validity of a complaint by selectively targeting and contesting the complainer's tacit or overt claim to moral authority and credibility.

By invoking a complainer's past transgressions, community members denounce an incongruence between the complainer's moral stance, as embodied in the complaint, and their moral status, as evidenced in the complainer's past conduct. Heinemann and Traverso (2009)

noted that by complaining speakers expose their inner states and thereby make themselves vulnerable to others' reactions. My analysis shows that, additionally, complainers are vulnerable because they put their moral status on the line; others can scrutinise it—providing they can claim the necessary epistemic access—for its congruence with the moral stance embodied in the complaint.

The findings reported here are consistent with Dersley and Wootton's observation that the focal practice "does not directly deny the truth of what [the complainer] is saying but *questions her capacity and authority to say it*" (Dersley & Wootton, 2000, p. 392, emphasis added). It is interesting to register that they identified that practice in the context of a marital dispute. Family life compares to life in a therapeutic community in at least one respect: members interact with each other on a daily basis for extended periods of time, form significant relationships within a domestic space, and accumulate knowledge on each other's conduct. Members can (and do) draw on these stocks of knowledge within their disputes in order to undermine each other's position. The practice of invoking a complainer's past transgression rests on community/family members' access to historical knowledge about those transgressions.

Invoking a complainer's past transgressions constitutes one of multiple practices that speakers can use to navigate a problem posed by complaints about a co-present speaker. Affiliating to these complaints amounts to an admission of fault, with negative implications for the complaine'e's public image. Dersley & Wootton (2000) show that complaine'es can resist a complaint by denying having committed the misbehaviour attributed to them, or by justifying it. Invoking the complainer's own past transgressions constitutes yet another solution. With it, speakers can tacitly or overtly admit having committed the transgressions attributed to them whilst at the same time resisting capitulating to the complaint. They do so by exploiting (and reflexively exposing) a constitutive property of complaints (at least of the type examined in this study): an expectation that the complainer's moral stance and status are congruent. Denouncing a status/stance incongruence enables speakers to undermine the moral validity of a complaint without denying its factual accuracy.

Finally, in this study I have extended the applicability of the status/stance analytic framework (Heritage, 2012). Community members orient to a fundamental congruence between complainers' moral stance and status as a condition for the validity of their complaints; reflexively, they exploit a stance/status incongruence in order to undermine those complaints. This seems one of the manifold ways in which people orient to the rights and responsibilities associated with their social relationships (including epistemic, deontic, and benefactive rights and responsibilities; Heritage, 2013) in the design of their social actions and sequences of actions. In the cases I have examined, speakers mobilise expectations about each other's moral rights and responsibilities through the ways in which they design and respond to complaints—I have referred to this organized dimension of speakers' interactional conduct as practical ethics. Moral considerations are woven into the ways in which members design their complaints and address others' complaints. Conversely, complaining and responding to complaints are part and parcel of the constitutive work involved in constructing moral orders within the social worlds we inhabit—an inherent feature of social interaction.

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## Appendix - Abbreviations

1 = First Person	INF = Infinitive
2 = Second Person	IPF = Past Imperfect
3 = Third Person	ITJ = Interjection
A = Accusative	M = Masculine
CL = Clitic	N = Nominative
CND = Conditional	NPST = Non-Past
D = Dative	PTC = Particle
EX = Existential	PST = Past
F = Feminine	PSTP = Past Participle
G = Genitive	RFL = Reflexive
GER = Gerund	S = Singular
FUT = Future	SBJ = Subjunctive
IMP = Imperative	SCL = Subject Clitic

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