
INTERROGATING TEARS

SOME USES OF ‘TAG QUESTIONS’ IN A CHILD PROTECTION

HELPLINE

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For several years we have worked with the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to understand what happens on their child protection helpline, which takes more than quarter of a million calls each year. This is a challenging environment for the Child Protection Officers (CPOs) who take calls, and for the callers who are often reporting disturbing worries about friends, relatives or neighbours. It is also a major research challenge to unravel the complexity of what is going on. Calls are highly varied in the class, region and ethnicity of the caller and the nature and severity of what is reported. Although the helpline can provide counselling, information and advice, its central role is to field reports of abuse that may require action. When serious abuse is suspected the NSPCC is legally mandated to pass the report on; typically this involves an immediate follow-on call to the relevant Social Services department. Calls reporting abuse average just over 15 minutes, but can be shorter or last over an hour. A range of features of the helpline interaction have been studied in our previous work (Hepburn 2005, 2006; Hepburn & Potter 2007; Hepburn & Wiggins 2005; Potter 2005; Potter & Hepburn 2003, in press a, b; Stokoe & Hepburn 2005; Wiggins & Hepburn in press).

Most of our work was done in the London call centre where up to 18 CPOs could be on duty at one time. Our corpus has evolved but we have worked with a primary set of some 140 calls. One thing that CPOs repeatedly told us was that dealing with callers who cry is particularly challenging. It seems that the problem is not just simply that it may be upsetting talking to distressed people (after all, upset is common on this helpline, and all CPOs taking calls have at least 3 years field social work experience in the area of child protection). There is a delicate interactional challenge to be managed here; the difficulty seems to be keeping the focus on the

abused child and, at the same time, preventing the caller from terminating the call.

This is dramatically illustrated by the following example:

1. AD Two 12 year old girls

↑↑I ↑↑ca(h)n't ↑↑ta(hh)lk

1 **Caller 2:** Um::
2 (0.6)
3 **Caller 2:** Yeah I'm ok(h)ay.
4 **CPO:** Y'okay ab't- al:right then.
5 .HHH so::=um:: (.) okay.=so ↑Kathryn
6 was just sayin abou::t (0.2)
7 [ye know th-]
8 **Caller 2:** [AHH HH]Hk↑↑iuHHhh↑uhh
9 (.)
10 **Caller 2:** ↑↑I ↑↑ca(h)n't ↑↑ta(hh)lk.
11 (1.2)
12 **Caller 1:** Hello:?
13 **CPO:** Hello::?
14 **Caller 1:** I'm sorry she's just li:ke >broke out in
15 tears< she ca:n't spea:k.
16 **CPO:** Ri:::ght.

Here, Caller 1, Kathryn (a pseudonym), is calling on behalf of her friend (Caller 2), who has confided to her that her mother's boyfriend is sexually abusing her. During the call the CPO urges Caller 1 to persuade her friend to come on the line. The extract shows that Caller 2 was able to talk through the usual permission to tape the call just prior to this, but when the CPO begins to question her more directly on lines 5-7, she is unable to speak of her abuse. On line 12 Caller 1 resumes the call, but hangs up abruptly after another minute of interaction, probably due to Caller 2's

pleas to finish the call, which can be heard in the background. The abrupt ending of the call prevented potentially significant child protection issues from being pursued further. CPO's have told us that soothing crying callers is one of the more challenging elements of their job.

Despite the obvious importance of this issue, when we looked to prior *interactional* research on crying, we found only a small number of studies, and even those had only indirectly addressed the topic. The vast majority of research into crying has been done by psychologists and has worked with either retrospective self-reports of crying or descriptive questionnaires. This research has treated crying as something broadly differentiated by severity and duration, but not composed of different elements that may be interactionally live. Nor does that literature deal with reciprocity. After all, crying is not simply a solitary activity. To rectify these omissions we began to work on crying and crying receipts. Hepburn (2004) started in the most basic way with the development of an extended scheme for the description and transcription of crying. This paper also showed how CPOs are both attentive and responsive to the different elements of crying in the calls. In a later paper, we also examined CPO's crying receipts, considering the sorts of activities that the CPOs engage in when confronted by caller crying, how they are occasioned by specific features of that crying, and how they contribute to the institutional practices involved in responding to these calls for help (Hepburn & Potter 2007).¹

The current chapter will extend this study of crying and crying responses, considering in particular the use of questions. It will focus on the role of so-called 'tag questions' in CPO responses to crying. When we started looking at crying sequences in detail we began to notice the prevalence of tag questions. To check the basis of this noticing we used the searchable orthographic transcript to find tag constructions. Electronic searches of files of orthographic transcript are far from

perfect as they miss a range of the less common constructions. Nevertheless, they are indicative. They suggest there are between two and three hundred tag questions in the 140 calls. One environment in the calls in which tags are common is where the caller is displaying full-blown crying. These constructions, however, do not appear in the crying segments of the 2 calls that show more minor upset.

The chapter will be structured as follows. We will start with some general observations about crying on the helpline, and then consider some of the relevant interactional research into tag questions. In the main body of the chapter we will work through a series of sequences in which the caller is crying and where CPOs issue tag questions. Our most general proposal is that tag questions in this environment are (parts of) turns that are affiliative and encourage participation. At the same time they do not make failure to participate a strongly accountable matter. Indeed, in this environment we view tag questions as having a weak response requirement, supporting observations made by Heritage (2002).

CHARACTERISTICS OF CRYING

Hepburn's (2004) scheme for the description and transcription of crying identified and distinguished seven features common in the Helpline calls: whispering; sniffing; wobbling or tremulous delivery; elevated pitch; aspiration; silence and sobbing. Crying (or some combination of these seven hearable features) occurs in about 10 percent of our corpus. These are sufficiently hearable that transcribers used to doing police and social services work labelled them using the category 'crying' in their first pass transcript. Hepburn (2004) categorised a range of CPO activities that appear to be responsive to crying. Specifically, there are 'take-your-times', sympathetic and empathic receipts and 'right-thing descriptions' in which the CPO reassures the caller that in spite of their upset they have 'done the

right thing'. There are also indications that CPOs will modify their prosody in certain ways, often mirroring features of the caller's talk.

In a recent paper (Hepburn and Potter 2007) we focused on two kinds of responses to crying: take-your-times and empathic receipts. Analysis suggested that take-your-times are used in environments where the caller displays an attempt, but failure, to articulate talk, demonstrated by inappropriate silence, wet sniffs, sobs, decreased volume and incomplete turn constructional units. We showed the way take-your-times can offer a licence for the late delivery of talk and are therefore affiliative. We suggested that empathic receipts can replace take-your-times, but are more common in environments where callers are unresponsive to CPO actions such as information seeking and advice giving. It is not uncommon for callers to show disappointment or upset about the advice offered. We suggested that empathic receipts are made up of at least two key elements – a formulation of the crying party's mental state and some sort of marker of the contingency of the CPO's formulation of that mental state.

A further recurrent feature of crying receipts in our corpus were 'tag questions'. These will be the topic of the current chapter. Let us first consider some of the linguistic and interactional research on questions of this kind in non-crying environments.

TAG QUESTIONS

In grammatical terms, a tag question has two parts: a statement (e.g. a declarative, imperative, description or assessment) and an attached interrogative clause. An example of such a declarative would be 'you haven't been to the doctor'. One feature of the declarative's auxiliary component is that it can undergo inversion with the addition of the attached interrogative clause or 'tag', e.g. 'you have' to 'have

you?' Auxiliaries may have positive or negative 'polarity' (have/haven't) and most commonly this is reversed from declarative to tag – e.g. negative-positive - 'you haven't been to the doctors, have you?' or positive-negative - 'you have been to the doctor', haven't you?'

That said, in this paper we start with the assumption that 'tag' and 'question', like many other grammatically defined words, are theoretically and analytically presumptive items suggesting things about placement and action that have yet to be fully specified. Grammatical categories may or may not map onto the kind of study of action and interaction we are engaged in here (see Schegloff, 1996b). Our aim here is to build on conversation analytic work that approaches tag questions as situated and locally managed objects.

In an early attempt at interactional specification, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) suggest that a turn can be made into a 'current [speaker] selects next [speaker]' first pair part (or initiating action) by the addition of a tag question, e.g. an interrogative form such as 'You know? Don't you agree?' (1974: 718) at the end of the turn constructional unit. They also suggest that a tag question provides an 'exit technique' for a turn, which has perhaps not been designed at the outset to select next speaker. So in turn-taking terms, 'tags' are useful in invoking rule 1a, current speaker selects next, occurring in the context of rule 1c - a speaker continuing after a possible transition relevance place (1974: 718). Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson also note that selecting next speaker via a tag question is sequentially different from selecting next speaker via an interrogative form at the beginning of the turn, as the tag is coming after the initial declarative component of the turn.

Heritage (2002) fleshes out this latter observation by comparing the placement of negative interrogatives at turn beginnings and turn endings in news interviews. He suggests that in turn beginnings they provide a useful vehicle for

making assertions, by providing a projection of an expected (preferred) answer that hangs over the whole subsequent assertion, which in news interviews is often provocative in nature. Conversely, statements with negative tags are treated as less assertive, and are more likely to be treated as a question to be answered rather than an assertion to be dis/agreed with. In effect, Heritage is suggesting that tag questions are a weaker form of interrogative, in that they claim less knowledge about the declarative component than a negative interrogative at turn beginning would. It must be noted that these findings are based upon the specific institutional environment of a news interview.

Heritage and Raymond (2005) examine assessments and their order as first or second parts of adjacency pairs, and suggest that tag questions play an important role in allowing speakers to fine tune their rights to knowledge relative to one another. When a speaker is assessing in first (or initiating) position 'it's a nice day', they may add a tag; the 'it is' becomes 'is it?', and then polarity is reversed to 'isn't it?'. In effect the speaker is saying 'even though I am assessing this in first position (i.e. claiming primary rights to assess) I know you know/have access to what I am assessing, and therefore share those rights'. Heritage and Raymond demonstrate across a number of examples that epistemic alignment can be achieved where the first speakers downgrade their rights to assess using a 'statement plus tag' format.

According to Heritage and Raymond (2005), speakers in 2nd (or responsive) position can engage in various practices to upgrade their epistemic rights to assess what has just been assessed by a first speaker. They can do this by displaying that they already held that position, by using a 'confirmation plus agreement' format. This delays answering the tagged question, which ought to be the first thing to be dealt with, e.g. 'it is' (confirmation that it is a nice day) plus 'yes' (agreement). Second speakers can also manipulate the sequence to gain first position, and the epistemic

rights that go with it, by issuing their own declarative plus tag, which Heritage and Raymond see as a more combative strategy. So in mundane interaction, whether the assessment plus tag question is sequentially in first or second position is crucial for understanding the interactional work being done. However, because our analyses show that a number of specific institutional tasks are being attended to in the Helpline calls, a more complex environment for analysing assessments and tag questions is created. Our aim is to explore one of the areas of interaction where tag questions are most common – in crying sequences.

TAGS AND CRYING IN CHILD PROTECTION CALLS

Let us start by considering some examples. The crying material is complex and we have chosen to reproduce longer extracts to give more of a feel of how the interaction unfolds. Before embarking, note that we as analysts are in the same position as the CPO in having only the information that is available in the call². So where we are noting background, demographic or contextual information, this comes solely from constructions offered by the caller. This makes this material particularly apposite for the consideration of tag questions, as epistemic issues are highly pertinent for both parties.

The following extract occurs just over half way through a four minute call. The caller gives her age as 15 and reports concerns about a friend who is self-harming by cutting herself. The caller has described the self-harm problem and relevant information (her friend's parents died 2 years earlier; she is being brought up by a sister with whom she is having conflict). The CPO has asked for details about the self-harm and, as is common with crying sequences, elements of crying start during the abuse description. The CPO has begun her advice giving sequence, suggesting that the caller encourage her friend to 'find an adult she trusts'. This receives only

minimal uptake from the caller. Extract 2 starts towards the end of this sequence with the CPO pursuing this topic by making suggestions about a suitable adult.

2. JX Self-harming friend

Obviously she's had a really difficult ↑t(h)i:me.=hasn't she: ,

- 1 CPO: Is there a teacher at schoo:l or someone
2 like tha[t].
- 3 Caller: [Yeah,
4 (0.3)
- 5 CPO: .Hhhh ↑I think that would be the best thing
6 to-e- fi:nd a- a grown up, who: .hh she trusts,=
7 who she thinks she can talk to: ,
- 8 Caller: Yeah.=
- 9 CPO: =.HHh because there's ↑lots of things that
10 could be ↓done to help your↓ ↓frie::nd,
11 (0.5)
- 12 CPO: .Hh Because obviously she'll- (0.2) she's
13 → had a really difficult ↑t(h)i:me.=hasn't she: ,
14 (0.7)
- 15 Caller: Yeah.
16 (.)
- 17 CPO: °Yeh° (0.2) you sound as though you're
18 very upset about it.
- 19 Caller: .shih ~yeh I am.~
20 (0.4)
- 21 CPO: °Mm:..°
22 (.)
- 23 Caller: [~I'm] clo(h)se to teahr:s.~

24 **CPO:** [°Yeh°]
 25 (0.5)
 26 **CPO:** I can ↑hear tha:t, (.) yea:h.
 27 (1.0)
 28 **Caller:** >.shih<
 29 (0.9)
 30 .shih
 31 (0.7)
 32 ↑hm .shhihh
 33 (1.1)

Immediately prior to this extract, there have been a variety of signs of distress, tremulous voice, whispering, sobbing, a wet sniff, a disrupted TCU and noticeable silences, but no acknowledgment of this from the CPO. The first thing to note here is the caller's minimal uptake on lines 3 and 4. Moreover, bearing in mind that the caller has contacted a child protection helpline about her friend's problem, the CPO's claim that there are 'lots of things' that can be done to help her friend (lines 9-10) should be of particular interest to her. It is perhaps the lack of uptake from the caller on 11 that leads to the CPO's tag formatted turn on 12-13.

The declarative component of the turn builds a picture of the friend's problem based on the things that the caller has told her '.Hh Because obviously she'll- (0.2) she's had a really difficult ↑t(h)i:me.'. The self-repair on 12 moves from a formulation of the trouble in present/future tense, "she'll have/be having (some version of a difficult time)" to the past tense 'she's had'. This is prefaced by 'obviously', suggesting that this is knowledge that unproblematically follows from the situation as described, and that anyone who didn't have direct access to the situation would see it this way. This initial declarative is therefore aligning with the caller in

the sense that it acknowledges that there is a problem to be addressed here, and it picks up on the important and NSPCC-relevant implications of the information given. The initial declarative content therefore produces this as something the CPO can surmise and make a judgement about from the information provided by the caller. More loosely, it offers reassurance just at the place where the caller seems to be displaying trouble.

Now note the tag format that follows the declarative. In Heritage and Raymond's terms, it constructs the inference about the friend's unhappiness as something that the caller has the primary right to know. Knowledge is a complex, asymmetric and practical issue on the helpline. As we have noted elsewhere (Potter & Hepburn, 2003) in general these interactions are organized to treat the caller as knowing about the specifics of the abuse and the CPO as knowing about legal procedures and social service practices. In using the terminal interrogative form the CPO describes features of the victim that the caller is in a more authoritative position to know and orient to, and invokes the caller's superior epistemic position with respect to those features. Part of the aligning sense of this tag construction is that it is built using the caller's narrative (going beyond treating it as a report or claim) and it invokes the caller's epistemic authority. Such a strong alignment may work to counter the trouble that the upset brings to the call.

It is important to note that in this corpus of calls, the kind of alignment shown in 12-13 is unusual outside of crying sequences. The more standard CPO stance is cautious or even sceptical. This is played out in their usual practices of information gathering and questioning during which the CPOs hold off offering their own judgements on the severity or morality of the reported abuse (Potter & Hepburn, in press a).³

The tag component in 13 receives a confirmation on line 15, but not without some delay on 14, a further sign of trouble with the prior turn. However, there is further complexity here. The caller has been displaying a range of signs of upset in the prior talk. In the advice sequence, the caller's minimal responses could be a sign of this upset continuing, which limits more elaborate responses, or it might be a sign of resistance to the specific advice offered.⁴ The tag construction on 12-13 can be effective for either of these possibilities because it is both affiliative (in two senses; it employs the caller's narrative and invokes the caller's epistemic authority) and promotes but does not strictly require a response.

Let us now consider further examples to explore the generality of this patterning. The next examples come from an adult, male caller. A father is reporting receiving a phone call from his son claiming his stepfather has attacked him. The caller says he has already called the police and is now phoning the NSPCC to see if there is anything more he can do. The caller's crying episode begins 15 seconds prior to this extract, when he is asked by the CPO to give details about his son's injuries.

3. JK Distraught Dad

[S]'very har:d when they're not there with you isn't it.

1 **CPO:** An 'is head hit the wall.
 2 **Caller:** .Hh °°Yhess°°
 3 (0.5)
 4 **CPO:** °Tch°
 5 (0.5)
 6 **CPO:** Okay take yer ti:me.
 7 **Caller:** .Shih
 8 (2.0)
 9 >.hih .hih<
 10 (0.4)

11 **CPO:** D'you want- d'y'wann'ave [a break for a] moment.=

12 **Caller:** [Hhuhh >.hihh<]

13 =>hhuhh hhuhh<

14 (0.6)

15 **Caller:** .shih

16 (0.3)

17 **Caller:** °°k(hh) ay°°

18 (1.8)

19 **Caller:** .shih >hhuh hhuh[h]<

20 **CPO:** [S]'very har:d when

21 → they're not there with you isn't it.=

22 and [you're-] (.) you're tal:kin about it.

23 **Caller:** [>.hhih<]

24 (0.8)

25 **Caller:** >.Hhuh .HHuh<

26 (2.1)

27 **Caller:** .shih

28 (0.2)

29 **Caller:** °.shih° (.) °°(Need) hhelph(h)°°

30

In a previous study (Hepburn and Potter, 2007) we noted the way 'take-your-times', as on line 6, are typically offered by CPOs where callers are attempting, but failing, to articulate talk, as on line 2. We suggested that take-your-times offer both a licence for the late delivery of talk, and a formulation of, and account for, the time already taken (e.g., the gaps on 3 and 5). The CPO's turn on line 11 then offers an upgraded and extended version of this, offering the caller 'a break for a moment'. The caller's whispered response on 17 is delayed and preceded by sobs and a sniff – all common features that constitute crying on this helpline (Hepburn, 2004). Almost two seconds

of a gap follow on 18 before the caller hearably sniffs and sobs, and this is followed (and slightly overlapped) by the CPO's tag constructed turn on 20-22.

The declarative component '[S]'very har:d when they're not there with you' provides the beginning of the type of turn that we have elsewhere (Hepburn, 2004; Hepburn and Potter, 2007) called an 'empathic receipt', a recurrent object in calls which contain crying, but extremely rare in non-crying NSPCC calls. We noted that empathic receipts are made up of two key elements:

- 1) a formulation of the crying party's mental/emotional state;
- 2) a marker of the contingency or source of that formulation

We also noted how empathic receipts can provide an account for the caller's crying, especially in ways that draw upon known-in-common features of the world.

Returning to the initial declarative component, we can see that it possesses some of these features. It indexes the caller's difficulties in dealing with the current situation: '[S]'very har:d', in combination with generalised features of the world 'when they're not there with you'. Note the scripted (Edwards, 1994) quality of 'they're' and 'you', indexing things known in common about parents and children, and things any parent would feel in this situation. The declarative also offers a sympathetic account for the caller's crying episode, and is therefore an aligning turn. Empathic receipts are also typically 'B-events' (Labov & Fanshel, 1977)⁵; they tell the recipient something about themselves, and in doing so make relevant a response, even without a tag question. As we have noted, such constructions are normally combined with a marker of contingency. In this case, this is provided by the addition of the tag question 'isn't it.'

The addition of the tag question makes relevant a response from the caller, by offering the content of the declarative as something that the caller is authoritative about and is therefore able to confirm. The tag question is thus a device for

indicating the contingency of the CPO's construction of the caller's mental state. The declarative alone, as a 'B-event,' would have made a response relevant, but would not have so explicitly downgraded the CPO's rights to know the contents of the declarative relative to the caller. The CPO's turn is therefore highly affiliative in that it offers an account for the caller's upset, but the contingency generated by the tag softens the presumptive nature of describing another's psychological state or circumstances.

It is perhaps notable that the caller responds in the transition relevant place made relevant by this tag question (after a beat of silence) with a sniff on 16, which Hepburn (2004) suggested may be a common preliminary to (or account for lack of) speech in crying calls.

Another interesting feature of the tag construction is that the CPO adds more post interrogative – 'and [you're-] (.) you're tal:kin about it.' (line 22). In effect this produces a turn-medial interrogative form, where the remaining TCU, or increment, or even a further TCU, can be added after the interrogative component. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in crying sequences and in resistance to advice in our helpline materials. Turn medial tag questions may provide a useful way of setting out knowledge about recipients and their circumstances, and producing it as known by both parties – it can therefore be used in somewhat coercive ways in advice resistance (Hepburn 2008). It may also constitute one exception to the normative preference for type conforming (i.e. yes/no) responses to yes/no interrogatives outlined by Raymond (2003).

On the basis of our current corpus of tag questions, we can speculate why more was added post tag. Firstly, the turn medial form of tag question may signal that a response is less immediately relevant (though again note the overlapping sniff on 23). The turn medial tag may be a particularly useful device where the caller is

displaying some difficulty in responding as it further softens the response requirement. Secondly, it may be important to position the interrogative ‘isn’t it’ at the precise point following ‘[S]’very har:d when they’re not there with you’ as it is here just after the generalised mental state formulation (rather than the further issue of ‘talking about it’) that its epistemic downgrading and indexing of the caller’s primary rights to this knowledge is needed most.

This extract continues:

4. JK Distraught Dad

you’re doing what you can now to actually offer them protection and help though are:n’t you.

29 **Caller:** °.shih° (.) °°(Need) hhelp(h)°°
 30 (2.5)
 31 **Caller:** .HHhihh°hh°
 32 (0.5)
 33 **Caller:** HHhuhh >.hih .hih<
 34 (0.7)
 35 **CPO:** .Htk.hh Well you’re doing what you can now to
 36 actually offer them protection and help though
 37 → are:n’t you.
 38 **Caller:** .Skuh (.) Huhhhh
 39 (0.5)
 40 **Caller:** °°I:’m not the(hehheh)re. Hh°°
 41 (3.2)
 42 **Caller:** .Shih
 43 (0.4)
 44 **Caller:** ~↑I’m sorry.↑~

45 **CPO:** An they als- well E-E-Eddie obviously al- thought
46 you were the person to contact to get he:lp.
47 **Caller:** Yeh. hh
48 **CPO:** F'which (.) ye know he turned to you: .hh
49 (0.7)
50 **Caller:** .Hh[h°hhh°]
51 **CPO:** → [T'help 'im.]=didn't he.
52 **Caller:** °°Yhhehhh°°
53 **CPO:** So 'e saw you as a person who could help in this
54 situa[tion] for him:.
55 **Caller:** [.Shih]
56 (0.9)
57 **Caller:** .Hhh hhhh↑oh sorry.
58 **CPO:** S'↑okay:, ka:y,
59 (1.3)

This extract overlaps with the last one, and we noted that the prior turn-medial tag question made relevant some kind of response from the caller. Following further delay, and sobbing and sniffing noises (Extract 3 lines 24-28), the caller responds on line 29, offering what sounds like a whispered formulation of the needs of his son, which itself may be offering further elaboration and accounting for what makes his situation 'very hard.' He is some distance away and his son needs his help. The response therefore has elements of self-flagellation, as the caller is blaming himself for his inability to help. This is followed by further long delays and sobs prior to the CPO's target turn on lines 35-37. The declarative 'Well you're doing what you can now to actually offer them protection and help though' is what has previously been referred to as a 'right thing description'. As noted in Hepburn 2004, these

appear commonly in crying receipts on the helpline, and typically entail descriptions constructed from information provided by the caller, in which the caller's described course of action is affirmed as having been the right thing. Hepburn (2004) speculated that these 'right thing descriptions' may work to move callers through the crying episode by encouraging them to agree with positively formulated descriptions of their own prior actions. Like empathic receipts, such descriptions are 'B-events' (Labov & Fanshel, 1977); telling the caller something s/he already knows about her/himself makes relevant a confirmation, even without the tag question. The distribution of rights to know things about oneself, rather than the grammatical (interrogative) form of the utterance, makes a response relevant.

The CPO's declarative 'right thing' component contains a number of features that build it as contrastive to the caller's prior (somewhat self-deprecating) turn describing what is making his situation seem 'very hard' – that his son needs his help, and he's not there. First, it is 'well' prefaced, a common contrastive move in disagreeing second turns (note that disagreement would be the preferred next action here, Pomerantz, 1978). Second there is emphasis, both in terms of prosody and content, on what the caller is 'doing' (line 35). Third, the formulation of the caller's 'protection and help' is marked by 'actually' (line 29), another feature that picks out the offering of protection and help as contrastive (Clift, 2001). Fourth, the whole description is finished with 'though', yet another contrastive element. Hence, at this point, the whole of the CPO's turn is designed to counter the caller's assessment of his 'very hard' situation as something that arises from his own impotence or negligence with regard to his son; it is therefore an aligning and supportive description. Indeed, this whole turn shows up the wonderful subtlety of the CPO's talk and her enormous practical sensitivity to the different features of the caller's barely audible whispered turn in line 29.

This complex declarative (lines 35-36) is then finished with a tag question, 'are:n't you.' (line 37), offering its contrastive yet supportive content as something that the caller will already know about and can confirm. It produces this description of the 'right things' that the caller has done as knowledge that is shared, which the declarative alone would not have done. Although as a B-event, the right-thing description would have made a response relevant, the addition of the tag question does further epistemic downgrading of the knowledge claimed by the CPO.

The caller responds immediately with a snorty version of a sniff, and a sob. In the context of what comes next this can be seen as a place holding move, preparing for whatever speech the caller is able to muster, and accounting for its immediate non-existence. Again the result on 40 is whispered, and is similarly self-deprecating. It counters the CPO's prior turn, which indexed the 'protection and help' offered by the caller, instead offering a description of himself as 'not there.' By implication, the father suggests that he was not there when his child needed him, reiterating his prior 'need help' turn.

We have noted in previous work the prevalence of silence in crying interactions (Hepburn, 2004, Hepburn and Potter, 2007) where CPOs leave space for the caller to compose themselves. Here, however, it is the CPO who is not responding on lines 41 and 43. Note again the sniff on 42, just prior to the caller's next turn, which is an apology. We have also noted the prevalence of apologies in callers' turns, which often come at places where there is disruption to the ongoing activities.⁶ In this case, the apology follows the caller's rejection of the CPO's aligning move, and the long gap that follows.

The caller's apology is followed by immediate uptake from the CPO, where she formulates things from the caller's son's perspective 'E-E-Eddie obviously al- thought you were the person to contact to get he:lp.' (lines 45-6) and gets an immediate

confirmation from the caller on 47. The CPO then spells out the implications of her previous comment – that Eddie not only thought that his father was the person to contact, but that he actually did ‘turn to’ him. There is some ambiguity about whether the CPO is going to continue this turn, which seems the most likely explanation for the caller’s lack of uptake on 49, and perhaps his hearable inbreath on 50. The CPO then produces an incremental turn ending on 51, in overlap with the caller’s inbreath, quickly adding another tag question ‘[T]help ‘im.]=didn’t he.’

The tag question again produces the prior turn as something that the caller has rights to know, and sets up a further requirement for confirmation from the caller in a way that the declarative alone would not have done. (The declarative, again, is a B-event statement.) Another useful feature of the tag question that seems particularly salient in this example is the way that it fills what might be (in the environment of upset) an empty transition space. So in turn taking terms, in the context of rule 1c, where a speaker continues after a possible transition relevance place (Sack, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 718), one possible additional function of the tag question is that it gives a recipient more time to compose her/himself and avoids the long silences characteristic of this kind of interactional environment.

In our final example, the caller is calling in about his own childhood abuse, which he has only ever talked about with his wife. He has started to show increasing elements of crying, and begins full-scale sobbing on line 3, just as the CPO starts to offer advice.

5. JX Male survivor

that’s the h(h)urt chi(h)ld there is[↑]un’ it.

- 1 CPO: Tch .hh (0.2) There are-
- 2 [(0.5)]

3 **Caller:** [>Hh Hh Hh] [Hh Hh <]

4 **CPO:** [There ↑ar] e things you can do

5 and the-there is [specialist help] (0.4)

6 **Caller:** [.HHHhh hhhh]

7 **CPO:** ou[t there.]

8 **Caller:** [↑↑Sorry.]

9 (0.4)

10 **CPO:** ↑That's alri:ght,

11 (0.8)

12 **Caller:** .H.shihh

13 (0.5)

14 **Caller:** HHh

15 (0.4)

16 **Caller:** >°↑Ghhd- al- like↑°°< (0.2) °°↑↑i°° (1.4)

17 °°↑↑bleedin k: id↑↑°°

18 (1.9)

19 **Caller:** °°Ghho' I'm a°° °↑↑grow:n man↑↑°°

20 (1.7)

21 **Caller:** K.HHHh Hh[h]

22 **CPO:** [Th]ere's:: a bit of the child in ↑all

23 of us an- (0.7) an [that's the h(h)urt chi(h)ld]

24 **Caller:** [.H h h h H h h h]

25 **CPO:** there is↑un' it. with you at the moment.

26 **Caller:** °.Hhhhh° >hh< >h< >h<

27 (3.5)

28 **CPO:** ↑Don't worry, °th- i-° take your ti:me.

29 (1.3)

30 **Caller:** D.Hhh ~I'm the one everybody lea:ns on.~

31 (0.5)

32 **Caller:** ↑would you be↑lie:ve it?

33 CPO: Mm.
34 (0.4)

The disruption to the CPO's advice giving is evident in her restarted turn on line 4, which may result in the apology and acceptance sequence on lines 8-10. This sequence, interspersed by long pauses and gaps, is followed with a wet sniff from the caller (12) and a whispered and high pitched meta-comment on how he is acting ('like a bleedin kid', 16-17, despite being a 'grown man,' 19) and then further sobs (21). It is in this environment that the CPO again produces an empathic receipt on lines 22-25. Note here that the mental state formulation '[Th]ere's:: a bit of the child in ↑all of us' is presented in a scripted (Edwards, 1994) and somewhat theorized idiomatic form. It is delicately designed to normalize and thereby account for the crying, picking up elements both from the kid/grown man construction of the caller just prior (16-17) and from the caller's report of flashbacks to being a 'little boy again' which he reported just prior to the exchange in this extract. The characterization of the caller's mental state in the receipt comes with both the child construction and the specific formulation of the hurt child 'with' the caller. 'n [that's the h(h)urt chi(h)ld there is↑un' it. with you at the moment.'

Our target is the 'tag question' in line 25: 'is↑un' it.'. This presents the prior formulation 'that's the h(h)urt chi(h)ld there' not only as general but also as something that the caller has the knowledge to ratify. Heritage and Raymond (2005) have shown that, when added to a second assessment, tag questions can upgrade the speaker's epistemic rights to assess the matter at hand, in that they issue a new first pair part to be responded to. It is therefore possible to see the CPO's response as countering the caller's strong self-deprecation on lines 16-19; employing the tag

question in 2nd position asserts the CPO's right to reassess the caller's negative evaluation of himself in terms of the types of normative feelings that we all possess.

Note that the CPO's tag question is not responded to by the caller. Aside from some aspiration and sobbing at the appropriate transition relevance place on line 26, there follows a long gap on line 27 and a 'take your time' from the CPO. So we could say that the lack of response to the tag question is a consequence of its soft response requirement and/or we could say that the aspiration, delay and 'take your time' are all orientations to some kind of response requirement.

A further complicating factor here is that there are various other features of the turn on line 25 that might render it as one that does not require a response. Firstly, the common-sense and idiomatic nature of the prior declarative forms - '[Th]ere's:: a bit of the child in ↑all of us n [that's the h(h)urt chi(h)ld there' could be heard as offering a professionally informed upshot to the caller's situation, and one that repackages the caller's prior 'bleedin kid' turn in a more theorised way. Secondly, as with extract 2, the tag is in turn medial position, following the addition of the increments 'with you at the moment.' This kind of continuation in what might have been a transition space may be a useful strategy for CPOs where callers' talk is severely disrupted by crying. The continuation also fills the space where there may have been a stronger requirement for some kind of uptake. A third feature that may make a response from the caller less relevant is that the mental state formulation just prior to the tag 'that's the h(h)urt chi(h)ld there' has interpolated laughter, which preliminary analysis suggests may soften the requirement for a response (Potter and Hepburn, in press b).

Our analyses have shown that although tag questions can make relevant some kind of response, they are not always responded to. This is so whether they are delivered at turn-medial positions, in overlap or in the clear, although lack of

response seems most likely in turn-medial position (supported by emerging analysis from Hepburn 2008). Our claim supports Heritage's (2002) sense of tag questions as perhaps having a weaker response requirement than some other interrogative forms. That is, combined with other features of the turn, and the sympathetic acknowledgment of upset from the CPO, the tag questions in our excerpts may be dampening the normative requirement for a response that other types of interrogatives would have made relevant. We have noted the complexity of such a claim in this kind of environment, where many actions are being done simultaneously: constructing B-event declaratives, doing empathic turns, responding appropriately to callers' self-deprecation, soliciting further information, giving advice etc. Nevertheless, it is easy to see the benefits of a softened response requirement where the caller is crying. Typically callers are issued a strongly aligning turn (treating the story as described as both epistemically legitimate and appropriate for NSPCC action) which encourages a further aligning confirmation and agreement response. Yet the absence of such a response does not appear to be a strongly accountable matter. And one of the central interactional features of crying is precisely that responses are disrupted. Put another way, tag questions appear to encourage the caller back on-line, without making them strongly accountable for their failure to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have focused on tag questions in interactions in a child protection helpline where the caller shows extreme upset. We have noted that tag questions are relatively rare in the helpline material in general, but relatively common in sequences that involve crying. We have shown what tag questions might be doing in order to explain why they might be common in those environments.

Tag questions combine a declarative element with an interrogative element. The declarative element can be oriented to different tasks. It can validate the seriousness and NSPCC-relevance of the caller's report and it can express alignment with the caller; for example, in extracts 2 and 4, the declarative element aligns with the caller. In more vernacular terms, the declarative element provides reassurance precisely at places where callers are displaying trouble through their crying. As we have noted, this reassuring stance is not a standard practice. While for the most part, the CPOs take a neutralistic stance, they repeatedly depart from this stance during interactions in which the caller is crying.⁷

The interrogative component of the tags does a number of things. It is affiliative in that it both validates the caller's epistemic authority and encourages (but does not strictly require) participation in a place in the call where participation is in doubt. One of the features of the crying is that it disrupts caller participation, leading to uncompleted TCUs and other signs of trouble. An important worry for the CPOs is that the caller will put the phone down before the report is made. In two of the calls in our corpus of 12 calls with elaborate features of crying, the caller terminates before the report is complete.⁸ CPO practices that affiliate, encourage participation but do not make failure to participate a strongly accountable matter, can therefore be valuable.⁹

Tag questions also have the effect of closing the transition space after the declarative. This might be particularly relevant when the caller is having trouble producing talk, as is the case with extreme upset. The CPO may add further elements or increments, which have a further effect of closing the transition space (Extracts 3 and 5). These elements, in turn, move the question away from the terminal position and may further soften the response requirement. In this sense, tag questions are multi-functional.

This analysis raises the broader issue of the sense in which tag questions, while interrogative in form, actually make relevant a response. They are not requesting information, nor are they testing the recipient. Although they project confirmation and agreement, at times they do not seem to strictly require it. Tag questions issue a new first pair part which has the potential for, but does not require, the recipient to be enrolled in further dialogue. They index the epistemic rights of the caller just at a place where the CPO is producing a declarative about the actions, persons and events that the caller is reporting on. They are particularly useful, therefore, for empathic receipts (where the declarative formulates the caller's emotional state) and right-thing descriptions (where the declarative characterizes the caller's course of action).

Part of the problem with addressing this issue, however, is the lack of a precise formulation of what a question is; that is, what is it to be a question *from an interactional perspective*? And this goes hand in hand with the further difficult issue of what an assertion is. Part of the problem here is moving from an analytic context driven by grammatical considerations to a context driven by social and interactional considerations. Notions such as “interrogative” and “declarative” have a technical grammatical sense (the word *question* also has a range of vernacular senses), but these notions may not be an unproblematic start place for specifically interactional studies. These are notions that might require some of the same sorts of respecification that cognitive or social structural notions have been subject to as they become a topic of such research (see contributions to Drew & Heritage, 1992, and te Molder & Potter, 2005.)

CPOs report that callers' crying is a difficult part of their job; it is a delicate task to keep the caller on the line, to soothe and support them. This task must be combined with judgements about when the caller is able to provide further evidence

of a possibly painful nature. We have shown how tag questions are one practice that CPOs use to perform this delicate task.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Hepburn (2004) also reviews prior research on crying and highlights its limitations.
- ² In our entire working corpus of 140 calls, there is only one repeat caller.
- ³ In fact, the pattern is complex. In Potter and Hepburn (in press a) we found that although CPOs generally focus on practical and organizational tasks rather than initiating assessment sequences that might divert from or even conflict with those tasks, they may inflect elements of assessment using intonation, “tut” particles, or person references. This can allow them to display a stance toward the reported abuse without becoming diverted from the primary helpline business.
- ⁴ These alternatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Being upset can be a way of resisting advice.
- ⁵ Raymond (2003) compares wh- interrogatives with ‘B-event statements’ (Labov and Fanshel, 1977), where the speaker proposes something to the recipient, and the speaker’s declarative elicits something that the recipient has primary rights in knowing, e.g. their current emotional state. Such utterances

often make relevant a yes-no answer. However, Raymond argues that these constitute a different sort of first pair part than standard interrogatives 'because these constraints are set by the distribution of rights regarding what speakers can know and say rather than the grammatical form of the FPP' (2003: 944)

6 Hepburn (2004) argues that a careful examination of examples suggests that the apologies are as much related to disruption of turn organization as they are to an inappropriate display of emotion or something similar.

7 The declarative component (for example in Extracts 3 and 4 above) can also be a description of a B-event (Labov & Fanshel, 1977) and as such makes a response relevant even without the tag question. One of the topics for further analysis with respect to tag questions is the range of different declaratives that CPOs use and how different declarative/question combinations have different interactional consequences.

8 Hepburn (2004) discussed the other example in some detail.

9 Although affiliative tag questions of this kind are the most common in our corpus, CPOs can use tags in other ways in crying sequences. For example, they may use them in advice sequences to build versions of the caller's beliefs or interests that are congruent with offered (but resisted) advice (see Hepburn & Potter, 2007, b).