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**Playing the blame game:
Accounting and the construction of disruptive behaviour in family
interviews**

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Abstract

Systemic conceptualisations suggest that family processes which involve blaming and holding the child accountable for their behaviour play an important role in the maintenance of disruptive behaviour problems. Discourse analytic work in family therapy settings has shown that accountability for the family's reported problems is a key concern for family members. This study used a conversation analytic (CA) approach to examine family members' accounts of child disruptive behaviour. The two participating families were both engaged in family therapy for disruptive behaviour problems. Each family participated in a family interview which was recorded and transcribed according to CA principles. The analysis focused on the discursive organisation of accounts, as well as how these accounts were constructed to actively manage accountability during the interviews. Accounts were organised into a three-part structure consisting of a 'statement of causality', 'warrant' and 'formulation'. Three strategies for managing accountability were identified: 'objectifying', 'normalising' and 'systematic vagueness'. The analytic findings are discussed in terms of their relevance to systemic theory and practice.

Introduction

Disruptive Behaviour and its Aetiology

Misbehaviour in children is something that most people would regard as a normal part of family life. However, persistent and severe misbehaviour can leave families struggling to cope. Such behaviour may be given a number of labels including conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A blanket term which encompasses all of these labels is disruptive behaviour disorders (DBD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These are all diagnosable disorders, defined within the DSM-IV, but many of the symptoms overlap, and in reality children presenting with disruptive behaviour often fulfil criteria for more than one of these disorders (Frick et al., 1992).

Family factors are important in the aetiology of DBDs. Conduct problems are associated with marital discord, and child physical or sexual abuse (Dodge et al., 1995; Fergusson et al., 1996; Rutter, 1994). Patterson (2002) has specified a range of parenting practices that are associated with conduct problems. These include inconsistent rules, unclear commands, responses to children based on mood and unresponsiveness to prosocial behaviour. Patterson explains disruptive behaviour as emerging from interactions between family members. For example, a parent may respond to mildly disruptive behaviour, but retreat in the face of escalating disruptiveness, which negatively reinforces the disruptive behaviour. This pattern of interaction is known as a coercive family process, because by changing his/her behaviour the child attempts to control the parent's response (and vice versa). Importantly, this framework means that disruptive behaviour can be viewed not as a trait or characteristic of the child, but as an emergent feature of family interactions.

Attachment

Failure to develop a secure attachment may have a special role to play in the aetiology of conduct problems. Attachment theory proposes that normal development requires an attachment to a primary care-giver (Bowlby, 1969). Several studies have shown associations between insecure attachment and conduct problems (DeKlyen, 1996; Crittenden, 2007). Hill et al. (2003) have combined concepts from attachment theory and systemic theory to give a dynamic conceptualisation of attachment processes in families. They propose that interactions between parent and child are organised into domains. A heightened affect or need for something to be done leads to a goal-directed, action-orientated phase. Two important domains which can be activated under these circumstances are attachment and discipline, which are particularly relevant in disruptive behaviour. During an interaction, domains can be mismatched (family members can be simultaneously operating in different domains) or there can be a lack of domain clarity (a failure of one family member to clearly communicate which domain they are operating in). These can be the cause of problems within the family system (Hill et al., 2011). What is seen as disruptive behaviour can in fact be an indication of an attachment request, but the parents may respond in the discipline/expectation domain, leading to a circular process of the child escalating and the parents punishing the child (Dallos et al., 2012).

The domains framework is influenced by Bateson's (1972) work on meta-communication. He proposed that in order for family members to operate effectively, they need to establish a shared interpretative frame regarding the nature of the interactional context that they are in. This involves meta-communication. Hill et al. (2003) also argue that the establishment of a shared interpretative frame (domain matching) is an interactional achievement. It seems logical that the establishment of

a shared interpretative frame would be affected by the habitual ways in which family members account for the disruptive behaviour. If the accounting practices of the parent(s) tend to position the child as accountable, then this may lead to a parental belief system which is biased towards discipline. This positioning would lead to domain mismatching, further exacerbating the child's disruptive behaviour. A parental bias towards discipline and punishment is also thought to contribute towards coercive processes (Patterson, 1982). Therefore, to understand how these processes occur, it is necessary to understand the accounting habits of the family.

During clinical or research interviews, family members give accounts of disruptive behaviour, which are the source of information for the analyst who wishes to gain an insight into the attachment processes operating in that family. These reports can be treated as factual descriptions of what happens in family life, and the domains approach can be applied to these descriptions to give a formulation of the family's difficulties. This is the method of analysis used by Hill et al. (2011). Alternatively, the accounts could be analysed in terms of how they are used by family members to manage accountability for the disruptive behaviour problem during that particular interview. Assuming that the family's accounting practices are habitual, the biases in accounting practices that are present in that interview would be present across other contexts. This allows the analyst to build a picture of the domain mismatches that may be occurring during family life, because producing a domain-specific response (e.g. attachment or discipline) is dependent on the habitual ways that the family members account for the young person's behaviour. This second approach requires a greater focus on discourse, and is the chosen approach for the present study.

Discourse Analysis

Systemic practice since the 1980s has embraced a social constructionist approach where language is seen not as a neutral means for conveying inner beliefs, but as a medium through which people compose themselves and construct meaning (Dallos & Draper, 2005). In this sense, family members' beliefs about disruptive behaviour are not seen as static and individual, but as something that is shaped by talk. Some systemic practitioners have used discourse analysis to study family interactions, which is a methodology that shares this constructionist approach (Burck, 2005). Dallos et al. (2012) have used discourse analysis to examine a group interview of a family with a child who presented with ADHD symptoms. They identified three dominant discourses which the family used to explain the young person's behaviour: biology, free-will and relational issues. They concluded that the emergence of these discourses was related to family members' underlying attachment strategies, and this conclusion was supported by findings from individual attachment interviews.

Other studies have used discourse analysis to examine talk in family therapy in its own right, without reference to conceptual frameworks such as attachment theory. These have shown the centrality of accountability in talk around disruptive behaviour. Parker and O'Reilly (2012) have shown that parent's accounts tend to position the child as the reason for therapy, and this mitigates their own accountability for the child's behaviour and maintains their identity as good parents. Another study showed that parents mitigate their accountability by blaming outside agencies or other family members (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). These highlight the problematic position of the parents as 'requiring therapy', which threatens their identity as good parents. What these studies have shown is that the rhetorical strategies used by parents, which act to 'save face', are worthy of analysis in their own right.

The studies by O'Reilly and Parker applied a 'discursive' approach, which is just one of the many approaches to analysing written or spoken communication that fall under the umbrella term of 'discourse analysis'. A discursive approach involves examining the detail of talk, its action orientation, and how social actions are displayed in the talk. This approach is often associated with conversation analysis (CA), and its psychological counterpart discursive psychology (DP) (Wooffitt, 2005). This method is ideally suited to examining the organisations and functions of family members' accounts of disruptive behaviour, and is the chosen approach for the present study. Taking this approach, attachment processes can be examined in terms of how related concepts (such as bonding, clinging, dependency) are invoked by family members when they produce accounts. This study also focuses on how the related domain of discipline and unacceptable behaviour can be invoked by family members in order to account for their actions.

Accounts

The term 'account' is often used to describe any section of speech or writing. However, in CA and DP the term account is applied specifically to a "discourse produced when people are explaining actions which are unusual, bizarre or in some way reprehensible" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.74). In this sense, the narratives that family members produce around the topic of disruptive behaviour can be described as accounts, because they explain the young person's behaviour and the family's reasons for requiring therapy. Taking a discursive approach, these accounts do not simply reflect the speaker's internal beliefs, but they are constructed to perform social actions for that context. The analyst is required to park concerns over the truthfulness or falsity of the speaker's accounts, and focus on what it is those accounts are doing

(Gale, 2010). In the context of family therapy, it seems that accounts can be used to manage accountability (Parker & O'Reilly, 2012).

A key contribution of DP has been to demonstrate that descriptions are rhetorically designed. Potter (1996) has shown that when producing factual descriptions, speakers orient to other potential inferences that could be used by listeners to undermine the facticity of their descriptions. This orientation is displayed by the speaker's use of defensive rhetoric i.e. the techniques and devices that speakers use to make their descriptions difficult to undermine. One important concern when producing a description is stake: If a listener is able to infer that the speaker has a particular motive for constructing his/her version of events, then that is a resource that the listener can use to undermine that description. The undermining will expose the description as partial or biased, and speakers use discursive tools (e.g. 'stake inoculation devices') to protect against this.

The Present Study

The broad aim of this study was to use a discursive approach to examine how family members co-construct accounts of a young person's disruptive behaviour. This was examined in the context of a single interview with each family. In pursuit of this broad aim, a number of specific aims were addressed:

- How are accounts of disruptive behaviour rhetorically organised?
- How do accounts manage blame and accountability?
- How are issues of stake and interest managed by family members?
- How are attachment and related concepts constructed in such accounts?

Although not specifically a research aim, the findings of this study have implications for how clinicians could approach disruptive behaviour problems in a useful way.

These implications are addressed in the final discussion.

Method

Design

The sources of the data for this study were two family interviews where the families were prompted by the researcher to discuss the behaviour problems that they have been experiencing. The data may be considered 'contrived', because these interactions would not have taken place without the intervention of the researcher.

Traditionally, in forms of discourse analysis such as DP and CA, there is a preference for naturally occurring data (Speer, 2002). This is data that has not been collected specifically for the purpose of research. However, there were important advantages of collecting data using an interview format. Firstly, it allowed conversation to take place around a specific topic of interest. Secondly, it allowed conversation to proceed in a format similar (although not identical) to that which takes place in many institutional settings (such as counselling, medical clinics, therapy) which means that the findings obtained may be more relevant to clinicians.

Despite the draw-backs of using 'contrived' data, previous discourse analytic research projects using interview data with groups have provided useful contributions to the understanding of a number of socio-political issues (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Augoustinos et al., 1999).

Participants

Participants were recruited at an inner-city family therapy service. The families recruited were referred to the service because of child anger or conduct problems.

The names of the families have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

The 'Green' family consisted of 'Keri' (10), her brother 'Jon' (19) and mother 'Tina' (48). Tina self-referred to the family therapy service because of Keri's oppositional behaviour, which she believes has become worse over the past year. Keri has not received a diagnosis of any behavioural disorder, although her brother Jon has recently been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Tina divorced Keri and Jon's father 'Nick' (50) 8 years ago. Nick lives nearby with his partner, and sees Keri approximately once a month.

The 'Smyth' family consisted of 'Josh' (14), his sister 'Lily' (16), their mother 'Hannah' (45) and step-father 'Justin' (56). The family were referred after Josh was diagnosed with ODD and Asperger's Syndrome 18 months ago. Hannah separated from Josh and Lily's father when they were young; Josh and Lily still have contact with him. 'Mike' is Josh and Lily's first step-father, who was with Hannah while Josh was between the ages of 3 and 9. Hannah and Justin have been together for five years.

Procedure

Interviews were video recorded which allowed non-verbal cues to be analysed in addition to verbal interaction. The interview started with two group activities- the family were asked to draw a genogram and make a closeness sculpt of family relationships. This was so that the researcher could become familiar with the family structure and also to encourage the family to discuss the impact of the problem on family relationships and vice-versa. The family members were then prompted to discuss a set of questions which were displayed to them using a flip chart. The questions were designed to cover a variety of possible explanations for disruptive

behaviour. There were seven questions in total which included questions on family relationships, emotion regulation, trans-generational patterns and professional input. The flip chart enabled the researcher to minimise the effect of gaze direction on selecting a next speaker. The overall set-up of the interview was designed to encourage interaction between family members with minimal interruption by the researcher.

Analytic Process

The verbal content of the interviews was transcribed orthographically. Initial reading and re-reading of this transcript took place to identify points during the interview where explanations of the behaviour problem were being constructed or negotiated. In this way, a corpus of accounts was collected. These instances were transcribed in more detail using Jeffersonian transcription (Jefferson, 2004). This allowed a detailed representation of pauses, intonation, volume and non-verbal cues (see appendix 1). These transcripts were read and re-read whilst considering the research questions stated in the introduction. The initial objective of the analysis was to identify the discursive organisation of the accounts. The analysis then focused on identifying the range of rhetorical features and strategies that were utilised by family members in order to manage accountability. The analysis employed CA/DP principles, and focused on some of the rhetorical devices that have been previously identified in the CA/DP literature. Analysis was carried out predominantly by the principle researcher, who also met with supervisors and a CA research group in order to discuss extracts and provisional findings.

Analysis

The interview required family members to give accounts of disruptive behaviour.

These accounts were prompted by either a direct question, a discrepancy between family members' descriptions of family life or a puzzle that was set up by previous descriptions. Most accounts were given either by the mother alone, or were co-constructed by the mother and other family members. Accounts commonly contained three components:

- *Statement*: explicitly or implicitly making a causal connection between some factor and the young person's behaviour.
- *Warrant*: providing evidence in favour of the proposed causal connection. This may take the form of reported events or descriptions from family life, or information taken from 'common-sense' knowledge.
- *Formulation*: providing a gist or upshot of the account, whilst promoting specific inferences that further develop the account to manage blame and accountability.

Once the formulation has been given, it is usually oriented to by the hearer, who gives a confirmation or disconfirmation as a second part.

Extract 1 (Green family)

Key: GB Interviewer, M Mum, K Keri (daughter)
S Statement, W Warrant, F Formulation

1 M Keri's behaviour in school's (0.5) brilliant.
2 GB ((nods))
3 M she's w- t- >one of the< top students .hh
4 GB mm hm
5 (0.5)
6 M the behaviour problem is. with me: (0.8) and Keri=
7 GB ((nods))
8 M =a'our home.

9 (0.4)

10 GB mm hm (0.5) yeah

11 M I don't y'know [hhhhhhhhhhh]

12 GB <[so it's ve]ry=
13 =[much a home thing]

14 S M >[I don't know whether it's< m(h)y] fault I=
15 =[don't know]

16 GB [mm:::::..]

17 W M .hh but um (0.6) but I think if it was anything medical.
18 GB ((nods))
19 (0.7)

20 M as >(d'y'know more than just me)< (0.8) Kerina would be
21 doing it all the time
22 (0.4)

23 GB yeah

24 F M you couldn't control it. (.) so it is: controlled. in or (.)
25 not- or it's uncontrolled in our environment

26 GB ((nods)) (0.3) mm hm
27 (0.4)

28 M do you agree with that °Keri°?

29 K ((nods))

At the beginning of this extract, M replies to a question from GB about professional input. In the process of replying to this question she creates a puzzle. M describes K's behaviour at school as "brilliant" (line 1) which contrasts with previous descriptions of K as disruptive. M orients to the need to explain this discrepancy by producing an account (lines 11-25) which shows the three-part organisation.

At lines 11-15 the first part of the three-part organisation is identifiable: the statement of causality. Here, M makes an explicit causal association between her actions and K's behaviour. This is problematic for M as it positions her as accountable for K's behaviour, and threatens her identity as a good mother, but she orients to the need to address this as it is a potential inference of the prior talk. This statement is delivered in a delicate manner, sandwiched between three "I don't know"s. These display uncertainty and act as stake inoculation devices (Potter, 2011). The laughter

particle in the word “my” minimises the significance of this association, whilst also displaying that it is not to be taken too seriously by GB (Potter & Hepburn, 2010).

At lines 17-24, the second part of the three-part structure is identifiable: the warrant. Here, M makes available background knowledge that evidences the association made at lines 11-15. The warrant is achieved through describing a hypothetical situation, where K’s behaviour is due to a medical problem, which draws upon a ‘biological’ discourse (Dallos et al., 2012). M then invokes common-sense knowledge that behaviour caused by medical problems is stable across different contexts. When combined with background knowledge that K is disruptive at home but good in school (lines 1-8), the association is warranted by means of the following syllogism:

- a. If the behaviour problems are medical then they would occur in all settings
- b. The behaviour problems don’t occur in all settings
- c. Therefore the behaviour problems are not medical

The addition of “d’y’know more than just me” (line 20) implies that disruptive behaviour not caused by a medical problem is a result of M. Therefore, this syllogism warrants the association between M’s parenting and K’s behaviour.

At lines 24-25 the third part of the three-part structure is identifiable: the formulation. A formulation provides a gist or upshot of a previous section of talk (Heritage & Watson, 1979). There are many ways of formulating a particular section of talk, so a formulation is tendentious: it promotes a particular interpretation. Formulations have been found to be a common feature of institutional talk, particularly psychotherapy where they are produced by the therapist, and refer to an interviewee or client’s prior talk (Antaki et al., 2005). However, in the data presented here, family members produce formulations of their own prior talk.

The formulation can be found at lines 24-25. Three central properties of a formulation are that they preserve, delete and transform some features of prior utterances (Heritage & Watson, 1979). M's formulation is "it's uncontrolled in our environment," which is a repeat of the second part of the syllogism which constituted the warrant. However, she uses "so" to present this as an inference of the prior talk (Schiffrin, 1987). This avoids the true inference (the final part of the syllogism), which is problematic for M. By deleting this information, M provides a gist of the prior talk which minimises her accountability. The formulation also transforms K's behaviour into an object which is out of control (see 'objectifying' strategy). This depersonalises the behaviour, positioning M and K as passive recipients of circumstance.

Formulations form the first part of an adjacency pair, as they make relevant at the next turn either a confirmation or disconfirmation by the recipient (Heritage & Watson, 1979). A confirmation is preferred. In extract 1, although a confirmation is given by GB, a confirmation is also actively sought from K.

The three-part structure is seen here as a rhetorical device used to manage accountability for the young person's behaviour. The remainder of this analysis shows how this structure allows family members to execute three strategies for managing accountability.

Objectifying

Some of the accounts involved constructing the young person's behaviour as a physical object. This allows the disruptive behaviours to be separated from the young person's true character, which mitigates the young person's accountability.

Extract 2 (Green family)

Key: GB Interviewer, M Mum, K Keri (daughter)

1 S K we:ll (0.4) .hh (0.4) personally, I think maybe I've like
2 (0.3) gro:w:n up in a (2.0) I have to say the word anxious,
3 I'm gonna pinch that off you, (0.3) um (0.4) pt (0.5) and then
4 you're like a::rgui::ng? (0.8) rowing shouting
5 M mm
6 K atmosphere? (1.3) .hh [so] maybe that's why
7 M m[m:]
8 (0.5)
9 W K I don't know. (1.2) pt .hh that's probably why: coz like when
10 you::'re=a (1.2) .hh baby you lea:rn (0.5) like when you're
11 like (0.3) a toddler. (.) baby. .h you pick up (0.4)
12 th[i::ngs?]
13 M [mm::::] (.) definite[ly]
14 K [you] like (0.3) even if you o:nly do
15 it like once a month you'll still pick it up but if you think
16 about it .hh that was- (.) were you and dad arguing like every
17 day or (.) nearly most [days]
18 M [well] we just didn't speak >a lot of
19 the time< we just weren't getting on [so just a]=
20 K [yeah but then]
21 M =ba::d at[mosphere]
22 K [you didn't s::peak. (0.4) and then you shou:ted a
23 lot [like]
24 M [mm:.]
25 K for (.) [days] on end]
26 M [yep] yeah] probably
27 K probably, .h so um (0.9) .h that's probably (0.3) why:: coz
28 peop- (0.4) like ↑babies: for instance learn how to eat. (0.5)
29 .hh >and people would think that's a natural thing but with<
30 a:rguing it's not (0.4) a natural thing but for me it is?
31 M mm
32 K because (0.9) I sa:w (.) you: (.) eat every day (0.4) and
33 F maybe I saw you ↑a:rgue everyday as well so [maybe]=
34 M [mm::::]
35 K =that's (.) why it's (so)- .hhh coz like in- (0.8) I (.) say
36 it's in me (0.9) literally

This account is prompted by a question from M to K requiring her to account for the difference in behaviour between her and her brother, Jon. At lines 1-9, K gives a statement which makes explicit a causal association between marital discord and her behaviour, mitigating her responsibility. “I don’t know” is used as a stake inoculation device, showing K’s orientation to the possible criticism that she is avoiding responsibility for her behaviour. Her warrant (lines 9-33) relies on the common-sense knowledge that children learn behaviours from their parents. K describes arguments between her parents, which warrants the inference that her behaviour was learnt. K’s description of her parents’ marital relationship is problematic for K: she could be criticised for being too young to remember the arguments she describes. She orients to this by initiating an insertion sequence mid-way through the warrant (lines 18-30) requesting confirmation from M that her parents frequently argued. After an initial disalignment, M provides a confirmation.

At lines 33-36, K gives an objectifying formulation. This is marked as an inference by ‘so’. The formulation is carefully constructed, and two repairs are initiated. The final version is “I say it’s in me”. The behaviour problem- “it”- is constructed by K as an object which is separate from her- “me”. K’s behaviour is also treated as physical entity, in the sense that it can occupy a physical space- inside K. This mitigates K’s accountability by promoting the inference that K’s disruptive behaviour is a result of this object, rather than a product of K’s free will. The preferred second part to a formulation is a confirmation, when this is not forthcoming (after a 0.9 second gap) K adds the tag “literally”, which is probably designed to evoke a response from M, but also does some further objectifying work.

Normalising

A second strategy for managing accountability is normalising. Mothers constructed their behaviour as a normal response to unreasonable or extreme behaviour by the young person. This mitigates the accountability of the Mother.

Extract 3 (Smyth family)

Key: M Mother, J Josh (son), L Lily (daughter), GB Interviewer

1 S M (0.2) he- he ca:n just be really .hh ↑a:ngry::: (.) you know
2 W he'll- he:'ll kick the doo::rs he'll slam the doo::rs .hh you tell
3 him to "s:top patting the do:g" and he'll go out of his wa:y to
4 almost ↑thump the do::g (.) .hh to an extent the dog's bit him,
5 (0.4) .hh (0.4) a:nd (2.4) he's- he's pulled his door off his
6 hinges, (2.0) ↑you have Jo::sh?
7 (0.5)
8 J I didn't pull it [off,]
9 M [you ki]ck the doo::r, if- if I: shut the bedroom
10 doo::r. and >you know just try and get away from it< he'll stand
11 outside .hh kicking the door. "mu:m (.) mu:m (.) MU:M" until I,
12 F (.) answer him. (0.4) so: there's- there's just no getting away
13 from him .hh when he is like that

This account was prompted by a question from GB, who asked what the emotional atmosphere in the family is like at times of conflict. M's statement (line 1) makes a causal connection between J's behaviour and a particular emotion: anger. J's disruptive behaviour is explained by reference to an 'emotional' state of mind which is recognisably different from a 'rational' state of mind that regulates normal behaviour.

At lines 2-12, M provides a warrant for this association. This takes the form of descriptions of J's behaviour, which are recognisable as 'angry' behaviours. M constructs these as script formulations (Edwards, 1994), where the reported behaviours are instances of a more general pattern. This is achieved by using phrases such as "he'll" and "you know", which make these recognisable as 'the kind

of things J does when he's angry'. Listing is used as a rhetorical device: providing detail and implying that these examples are taken from a number of memories of J's behaviour that are available to M. The words used by M to describe J's behaviour (e.g. "thump", "kick") are drawn from a discourse of violence which constructs J's actions as disorderly, uncontrolled and harmful (Auburn et al., 1995). The use of this discourse positions J as accountable. At the same time, by contrasting her behaviour to J's, M constructs her actions as reasonable. In order to do this, M uses a normalising strategy. At lines 2-3 M reports her actions in the format "you tell him to stop patting the dog". By referring to herself using the general reference term "you", M promotes the inference that her action was a normal response to J's behaviour. At line 10, M uses "you know" to invite GB to recognise her action ("just try to get away from it") as a normal response to J's behaviour. The term "just" also promotes an inference of normality, by framing M's 'normal' response as no more than that. This strategy mitigates M's accountability. However, it is problematic for J, who uses the level of detail in M's account as a resource for undermining her version of events (line 8).

M's formulation (lines 12-13) preserves the reference to M trying to get away from J, which maintains the normalising strategy. However she also transforms this action into something that is impossible, thereby positioning herself as a victim and mitigating her accountability. M makes the addition of "when he's like that", which constructs J's disruptive behaviour as intermittent rather than constant. This manages J's accountability by promoting the inference that his behaviour is the result of a transient emotional state rather than a reflection of his true character.

Systematic Vagueness

A third strategy for managing accountability is systematic vagueness. This strategy establishes a frame of confusion around the behaviour, and hence mitigates the accountability of the Mother. Extract 4 follows on from a discussion about M's divorce from Mike, which M described as having an "impact" on J.

Extract 4 (Smyth family)

Key: GB Interviewer, M Mum, J Josh (son), L Lily (daughter)

1 M u- is- it's not about doing things wro::ng >Josh it's< not (0.3)
2 [wro::ng,]
3 J [I wasn't a prob]lem.
4 (0.5)
5 S L just like symptoms. like [you were] shy no ey[e contact]
6 M [yea:::h] [but you::] you
7 might (.) yea:h. tha- that's- I'm- I'm not
8 [sa:::ying it was] wrong=
9 W L [you've always had that]
10 W M =it was just there was always something (.) different he was i-
11 (0.3) hh you know in his own little world you could be talkin'
12 'im lights on nobody's home an' .hh (0.4) you: talk to him and
13 then (0.6) it's like you've almost said no:thi:ng and you're like
14 (.) an' he'll like and he'll just change the subject completely?
15 F (0.5) uh you know so it's- it's not- it wasn't ba::d things it
16 just (0.4) something wasn't ri::ght.
17 GB ((nods))

Leading up to this sequence, two competing descriptions are produced of J's behaviour before the divorce. M describes something that "weren't right", whereas L and J describe there being no problems. In the sequence that follows, M and L co-construct an account which addresses this discrepancy.

At line 5, L describes J as displaying "symptoms". This is a statement of causality because the word 'symptom' implies that J's behaviour was caused by some underlying disease process (Asperger's). This addresses the discrepancy in

descriptions, by treating the previous descriptions as not concerning the same object. L's statement implies that M's descriptions were concerning J's 'symptoms', whereas J and L's earlier descriptions were concerning J's 'naughty' behaviour. She provides a warrant for this claim (lines 5 & 9) by giving examples of the symptoms, and an indication of the time course of these symptoms, which supports a biological/hereditary explanation.

M aligns with L's account, and develops it further by making a clear distinction between what is "wrong" and what is unusual. Her account at lines 7-16 uses systematic vagueness as a rhetorical device, and to manage accountability. Potter (1996) describes detail in accounts as a double-edged sword: whilst it builds authenticity, it can also be used as a resource by participants to undermine the account. Therefore, vagueness can also be used as a form of defensive rhetoric. M's statement at line 10- "there was always something different"- supports L's 'medical' association, but is also suitably vague as to resist any potential contestation from J. She goes on to warrant this association by reporting J's unusual behaviour (lines 10-14). Again, M uses rhetorical vagueness in the form of idiomatic expressions- "own little world"; "lights on nobody's home"- these are vague but robust: they are difficult to challenge with specific information or facts (Drew & Holt, 1988). M gives a formulation (lines 15-16), which promotes two inferences: firstly, that there was no moral dimension to J's behaviour and secondly, that M was unaware of the exact cause of J's unusual behaviour (systematic vagueness). These inferences mitigate the accountability of both M and J. Systematic vagueness accounts for the gap between M's recognition of symptoms in J and the point at which she sought a diagnosis.

Discussion

Family accounts of disruptive behaviour were organised into a three part structure. This consisted of a statement of causality, a warrant and a formulation. For some accounts the three-part structure was clearly recognisable (e.g. extract 1), in others the three-part structure was not immediately recognisable. One example is extract 2, where there is an insertion sequence mid-warrant. In other cases (e.g. extract 4) accounts are co-constructed so that multiple speakers contribute to the warrant, or multiple statements of causality are given and then aligned with or contested. This shows that this structure is a flexible resource, which can accommodate a number of additional devices in the service of establishing authenticity, or displaying consensus. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that participants orient to the need to put forward an explanation (statement of causality), give evidence for that explanation (warrant), and further develop the account to protect against undesirable inferences (formulation). The overall function proposed for this structure is the management of accountability for the problems being discussed. This was achieved through three strategies: objectifying, normalising and systematic vagueness.

This analysis utilised a discursive approach, which distinguishes it from much of the other research in this area. Studies investigating parental attributions of child disruptive behaviour used questionnaires and interviews with parents of conduct-disordered children (Baden & Howe, 1992; Dix & Lochman, 1990). It was found that parents tend to attribute a child's behaviour to intent and other negative attributes, which leads to a blaming stance. These studies take a cognitive approach: parental beliefs are seen as relatively fixed and as mental phenomenon. A discursive approach sees beliefs as talked into being, and allows the analyst to examine closely *how* this occurs, as well as the function that these beliefs serve in the context in

which they are produced. This study demonstrates that accountability and blame are phenomena that are constructed through talk and are continually negotiated using rhetorical strategies including the three named above. Family members drew upon various explanations, depending on the actions that were being performed at that point in the interaction. For example, there were many instances where the mothers did not take a blaming stance, and their constructions of disruptive behaviour had the effect of mitigating the accountability of the young person. At other points during the interview it was necessary for mothers to construct more blaming versions of disruptive behaviour in order to mitigate their own accountability and protect their identity as good mothers. This supports the idea that these beliefs are changeable and tied to the interactional context in which they are produced.

Another area of research is the domains-based approach to family functioning (Hill et al., 2003). Hill et al. (2011) have applied this approach in a discourse analytic fashion to accounts of family disputes. The analytic strategy involves describing the interactions that family members report in terms of domains of functioning. The analyst must make the practical assumption that by examining family members' accounts, it is possible to build an accurate picture of the interactional processes that took place during the reported family disputes. In contrast, a discursive approach involves suspending this assumption to focus on the action-orientation of talk. This study demonstrates that family accounts of disruptive behaviour do more than just transmit factual information from family member to interviewer: They are designed to manage accountability, encourage alignment from co-participants, minimise negative inferences and resist undermining from co-participants.

Although the approach taken for this study differs from those above, these findings have the potential to be integrated with a coercive model and a domains framework.

This study has shown that a discursive approach can be used to examine how family members position themselves in terms of accountability during an interview. A similar approach could be applied to therapy sessions and other settings, by identifying the accountability-management strategies that are used by family members. Objectifying strategies generally decrease the accountability of the young person, normalising strategies generally increase it. If a young person is consistently positioned as accountable then the family belief system is likely to be biased toward discipline, if a young person is consistently positioned as not accountable then the family belief system is likely to be biased toward attachment (Dallos et al., 2012). Patterson (1982) states that parental blaming of children (i.e. positioning of them as accountable) should also lead to punitive parenting and coercive processes.

The variability inherent in family accounts of disruptive behaviour is also a resource that may be used by clinicians to achieve therapeutic objectives such as interrupting blaming patterns of communication. A clinician may align with and develop objectifying formulations to implement an 'externalising' approach (White & Epston, 1990). Such an approach might reduce the burden of accountability on the young person and readjust the balance between attachment and discipline.

Some limitations of the present study also need to be addressed. The interactional context of the interview was clearly unusual: the families were interviewed not by a clinician but by a student-researcher, and questions were posed to the family using a flip-chart. This limits the generalisability of these findings to other contexts such as therapy sessions and consultations. This research may be extended by applying a discursive analysis to family accounts of disruptive behaviour that occur naturally in family therapy sessions. It is anticipated that this will confirm the findings of the present study, and perhaps identify new strategies for managing accountability.

Another weakness of this study was that a relatively small amount of data was analysed (two hours of interviews). Therefore, the corpus of accounts available for analysis was also relatively small. Nevertheless, the organisational structure and accountability-managing strategies were identified across the two participating families. This suggests that the findings of this study are likely to be generalisable to other families who present with similar problems.

A discursive approach is useful for showing how accountability is managed, but is less helpful at answering why accountability is such a key concern for families with these sorts of problems. The deployment of these strategies could be a reflection of the blame that parents feel as a result of social constructions of DBDs, which are clearly prevalent in our society (Horton-Salway, 2011). Taking a psychodynamic stance, the deployment of these discursive strategies may be driven by the emotional discomfort that parents feel when blaming inferences are available. Although this analysis shows that these concerns are oriented to by parents, accountability risks becoming the 'elephant in the room' because of the non-blaming stance which is the norm in family therapy. One solution offered by Coulter and Rapley (2011) is to encourage open discussion of these issues, in order to allow parents to take some responsibility. They argue that this can be accomplished without blaming parents as long as a clear distinction is made between responsibility and blame. The key difference is that responsibility does not imply intent, whereas blame does.

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Appendix 1- Glossary of transcription symbols.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| [| <i>Left bracket</i> indicates the point of overlap onset. |
|] | <i>Right bracket</i> indicates the overlap end point. |
| = | <i>Equal signs</i> indicate no break or gap. <i>A pair of equal signs</i> indicate no break between two lines. |
| (0.0) | <i>Numbers in brackets</i> indicate elapsed time to the nearest tenth of a second. |
| (.) | <i>A full-stop in brackets</i> indicates a brief interval (less than a tenth of a second) |
| <u>word</u> | <i>Underscoring</i> indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude |
| ::: | <i>Colons</i> indicate lengthening of the prior sound, the greater the number of colons, the longer the sound. |
| ::__ | <i>Combinations of underscore and colons</i> indicate intonation contours. |
| w _o ::rd | Indicates falling contour. |
| w _o :: <u>rd</u> | Indicates rising contour. |
| ↑↓ | <i>Arrows</i> indicate shifts to especially high or low pitch. |
| .,? | <i>Punctuation marks</i> indicate 'the usual' intonation. A <i>full-stop</i> indicates a final intonation, a <i>question-mark</i> indicates a questioning intonation, and a <i>comma</i> indicates a continuing intonation. |
| WORD | <i>Upper case</i> indicates loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk. |
| °word° | <i>Degree signs</i> indicate that sounds are softer than the surrounding talk. |
| <word | <i>A pre-positioned left carat</i> indicates a hurried start. |
| - | <i>A dash</i> indicates a cut-off. |
| >< | <i>Right/left carats</i> either side of an utterance indicate that that utterance is speeded up relative to surrounding talk. |

- <> *Left/Right carats* either side of an utterance indicate that that utterance is slowed down relative to surrounding talk.
- .hh *A dot-prefixed row of 'h's* indicates an in-breath.
- hh *A row of 'h's* indicates an out-breath.
- wohhrd *A row of 'h's within a word* indicates breathiness.
- (h)wo(h)rd *Bracketed 'h's* indicate plosiveness, associated with laughter, crying etc.
- () *Empty brackets* indicate that the transcriber was unable to identify what was said.
- (word) *Words in brackets* represent the transcriber's best hearing of what was said.
- (()) *Double brackets* contain transcriber's descriptions.

Adapted from Jefferson (2004).