Characterological formulations of persons in neighbourhood complaint sequences

Marc Alexander and Elizabeth Stokoe

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

ABSTRACT
This article shows how speakers mobilise characterological formulations of people and, particularly, ‘types’ of persons, in social action. We extend previous work in discursive psychology, in which notions of self or others’ identity have been well-studied as categorial practices, by focusing specifically on the occasioned use of '[descriptor] person' formulations which index the characteristics of people. Drawing on a British corpus of 315 telephone calls about neighbour problems (e.g., noise, verbal abuse) to environmental health and mediation services, we show that callers build in-situ descriptions of self and neighbour for the practical activity of complaining or defending against accusations – as types of people that are, for instance, reasonable (e.g., ‘I’m an extremely tolerant person’), in contrast to their neighbours’ shortcomings (e.g., ‘he’s a rather obnoxious person’). Our findings demonstrate that psychological predicates of self and other, indexed through characterological formulations, are recipient designed (i.e., formulated to display an orientation to co-present others) in ways that shape the institutional relevance for service provision. We conclude that, like many other aspects of the psychological thesaurus, ‘character types’ are not just the preserve of psychologists but also a routine resource for ordinary social interaction.

KEYWORDS
Characterological formulations; neighbourhood disputes; environmental health; mediation; complaints; discursive psychology; conversation analysis; institutions; service provision

Introduction

In this article, we demonstrate how notions of self and other can be used to mobilise the characters and characteristics of persons in everyday interaction. Using discursive psychology (DP) underpinned by the methodological framework of conversation analysis (CA), we show how ‘types’ (i.e., the inherent qualities and characteristics of individuals) of people are characterologically reworked (i.e., that human characteristics are displayed through interaction) as a member’s concern for the reporting and managing of complaints about neighbourhood problems in telephone calls to mediation and environmental health services. We supplement and extend DP’s programme of research by examining how characterological formulations can be used to index the character of callers and neighbours in ostensibly positive or negative ways when
making the case for assistance. In so doing, we complement closely related academic work in areas of DP, CA, and discourse analysis (DA), for instance, membership categorisation (Sacks 1992b), identity (e.g., Edwards 1998; Stokoe & Edwards 2009), person reference (e.g., Schegloff 2007a; Smith 1978), script formulations (Edwards 1994), dispositions (e.g., Edwards 2006b), and attitudes (Potter & Wetherell 1987). This article continues to develop our insight into how people invoke, construct, and mobilise the characteristics of persons as part of day-to-day conduct.

For more than 30 years, the discursive psychological approach to social interaction has been significant for revealing how speakers formulate and disclaim the biases, motives, and subjective states of the self and others through their ways of talking as they go about their daily lives (e.g., Billig 1987; Edwards 1994, 1997, 2007; Edwards & Potter 1993; Potter 1996; Stokoe & Hepburn 2005). In that tradition, significantly, we examine the use of lexical utterances (i.e., ‘person’) that, used in conjunction with person-descriptors, mobilise a range of indexical possibilities regarding the essential characteristics of people in calls to dispute resolution services. Call-takers in these services are ostensibly unaware of the context of neighbourhood concerns, so characterological formulations can be seen as a way of accounting for or defending against the morality of callers and their neighbours, which are regular features of building complaints and complainable activities (e.g., Dersley & Wootton 2000; Drew 1998; Edwards 2005; Stokoe & Edwards 2015). In this article, we illustrate how these lexical utterances have somewhat permeable or ‘fuzzy’ category boundaries which can be deployed in variety of rhetorical projects in these interactional environments (Edwards 1998).

For clarity, our use of ‘characterological formulations’ can be understood within a range of descriptions which formulate a person’s ‘tendencies, dispositions, moral nature, desires, and intentions’ (Edwards 2006b, p. 498). However, our focus is on how the characteristics of individuals, through the occasioning of the lexical ‘person’, become a resource for action, as formulated in discourse. Below, we situate our phenomenon within related studies in DA, DP, and CA that have engaged with person-related themes as rhetorical, lexical features in written texts and talk-in-interaction.

Therefore, our purpose for the remainder of this article is twofold. First, we identify and draw together scholarly research in which characterological formulations are made relevant for ascribing psychological states to persons in various ways. Second, we show this research has somewhat overlooked a particular rhetorical utterance, that is, ‘[descriptor] person,’ by presenting instances of calls to neighbour dispute resolution services which exemplify our phenomenon.

**Characterological formulations of persons**

Expressions such as ‘I’m a [descriptor] person’ and ‘she’s a [descriptor] person’ are typically considered in ways that mark the inherent character of
people in standard dictionary definitions – ‘an individual human being; emphasises the plurality and individuality of the referent’ (“Person” n.d.), and relatedly ‘the quality or condition of being a person’ (“Personhood” n.d.) and ‘the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual’s distinctive character’ (“Personality” n.d.). While ascribing person types, at least in everyday discourse, implicates people as having particular characteristics, we are not proposing that its lexical use maps onto cognitive function (i.e., revealing the intentions or dispositions of people). On the contrary, our interest is in its rhetorical production at the ‘rich surface’ (Edwards 2006a) of talk itself, in the environment of members of the public contacting dispute resolution services to complain about their neighbours’ conduct in pursuit of assistance from such organisations. Our starting point will be examining how the lexical term ‘person’ and broader but related themes of personhood and personality are used as discursive resources to pursue interactional projects in everyday conduct and written texts.

Research that has systematically applied DA to characterological formulations (c. 1980s) is significant for revealing ‘how language can be used to construct and create social interaction and diverse social worlds’ through talk and text (Potter & Wetherell 1987, p. 1). For instance, an evaluation of literature (e.g., Charles Dickens novels) and trait theory explores how discourses of the self are represented and characterised in text, specifically the ways in which story characters are presented as ‘complete,’ suggesting ‘that people simply are their actions and qualities and can be read purely in terms of these dispositions’ (Potter, Stringer & Wetherell 1984, p. 144). The authors propose that the Dickens character in question (Mr. Podsnap in Our Mutual Friend) ‘conforms precisely to a familiar theory of personality which verifies and sustains his reality’ (Potter et al. 1984, p. 144). Potter and colleagues’ application of textual analysis presents a counterargument to trait theory’s assumption that ‘personality’ naturally and predictably guides actions and behaviour. In this way, the mobilising of persons as particular types of people in texts can be seen as a resource for displaying members in terms of their underlying characteristics.

The critique above demonstrates the rhetorical impact of written discourse and provides a basis for observing the action-orientation of psychological matters, worked up in and through language use. DP’s programme of research (as with CA) has an overarching interest in how members go about characterising persons in talk-in-interaction. In 1978, Dorothy Smith published what would become, for DP, ethnomethodology, and forms of social constructionism, a highly influential study of how people are referenced and described in mundane interactions: K is Mentally Ill. Smith examines how factuality is built into accounts that frame the behaviour of a person (a girl, ‘K’) as deviant and nonnormative and her psychological state as ‘mentally ill’ (Smith 1978). Smith’s examination of interview data reveals how descriptions of K as mentally ill and
her conduct deviant are formulated from the outset of the interviewee’s account (and interviewer’s co-construction of the text), which in turn legitimises the version of K’s acts as authentic – as observed through the rules and norms of social order, formulated as independent of the wishes of observers of K’s conduct (Smith 1978).

The construction of K as suffering from mental health problems is designedly ‘unmotivated’ through the affordances of social organisation. Yet the description of K’s conduct is also constructed to be recognised as a particular kind of behaviour in its cultural environment – a duality reinforced through research which examines calls to dispute resolution services wherein callers frame neighbourhood problems in terms of their (il)legal status and themselves as just reporting the facts, as ‘noncomplainers’ (Alexander & Stokoe 2019). Smith’s (1978) study is an important and well-cited piece of social scientific research and is an example of how disputable matters of everyday life can be constructed as authentic and factual accounts of what happened. The point we want to emphasise is the distinction between K’s mental state and the regular, ordinary circumstances in which her behaviour is being reported. As we will show, when people call dispute resolution services, neighbours’ actions are framed as a result of their person-type in contrast to the situational conduct of callers, designed as a consequence of their neighbours’ behaviour.

The sense of drawing on characterological themes is exemplified in more adversarial environments, with the seminal DP critique of a psychological assessment of witness testimony at the Watergate hearings in the 1970s (Edwards & Potter 1992a, 1992b). Criticism focuses on cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser’s claim that ‘errors’ in a witness’s (John Dean) recollections of past events were due to ‘personality’ flaws (e.g., ‘ego’ distortions) and that Dean’s testimony should be considered as factual accounting through ‘repisodic’ (i.e., the construction of a single memory from repeated past events) formulations (Edwards & Potter 1992a). The authors argue that Neisser’s straightforward acceptance of truthful accounting and personal bias errors neglect the ways in which laypersons go about accounting for themselves and others in everyday environments; in Dean’s case, how testimony discursively attends to matters of blame (for then US President Richard Nixon) and mitigating factors (for himself) (Edwards & Potter 1992b). In this way, traditional ‘personality’ models and biases of people might be better understood ‘as different constructions of personhood, discursively available for placing in different kinds of narrative or to do different kinds of interpretative work’ (Edwards & Potter 1992a, p. 128; emphasis added). We draw on Edwards and Potter’s (1992a, 1992b) work to make two points specifically relevant to the current study. First, the courtroom environment, particularly disputable moral matters, are displayed as contrastive, assigning blame (to others) and innocence (to the self). Second, matters of ‘personality’ or
‘personhood’ are not enduring psychological entities, as Neisser would have it, but are available as resources for action, discursively displaying people in favourable or unfavourable ways.

The social scientific research above is significant for showing how characterological formulations can be used variously in written texts, constructing factual accounts, and as a critique of mainstream psychology. In turn, this work underpins our understanding of the ways in which the lexical use of ‘person’ can be drawn on as a rhetorical resource in social conduct. Key research which informs our phenomenon is explicated through well-known DP work on ‘script formulations,’ essentially, how ‘participants formulate the nature of actions and events as “scripted” (typical or routine) or exceptional’ (Edwards 1994, p. 211). Significant are the ways in which speakers orient to matters of person-types as regular, expected ways of managing accountability and morality, as revealed in analysis of relationship counselling session recordings with the couple ‘Jimmy’ and ‘Connie’ (Edwards 1995, 1997). For instance, in the fragment below, ‘jealously’ is formulated by Connie as an inherent characteristic of Jimmy:

01 Connie: At that point, (.06) Jimmy ha- (.g) my-Jimmy
02 is extremely jealous. Ex-extremely jealous
03 person. Has always been, from the day we met.

(Edwards 1995, p. 329)

Note that Jimmy is not only described as being extremely jealous but also as an extremely jealous person (lines 2–3). Our interest here is the mobilisation of Jimmy’s person-ness as a resource for ascribing qualities of Jimmy’s character, which is attended to by the author in that ‘Connie describes Jimmy as possessing a deep-rooted personality disposition ... which is both extreme and enduring’ (Edwards 1995, p. 329). Significantly, while being ‘extremely jealous’ orients to Jimmy’s emotional state as a potentially temporary one, the subsequent redoing with the addition of ‘person’ indexes the underlying character of Jimmy as a particular person type. Notably, Connie refers to herself subsequently as ‘N↑OT THE TYPE that’d turn round and ignore somebody,” which is assessed as performing ‘... scripts and dispositions; reference to a type of person provides a basis for associated patterns of action and reaction’ (Edwards 1995, p. 336).

With regard to the terms ‘disposition’ and ‘dispositions,’ as indicated above, they provide for a subtle distinction between research on dispositions (e.g., Edwards 2005, 2006b) and our focus on characterological formulations of persons (or disposition). To provide some clarity to this
fine difference, we provide two Oxford English Dictionary definitions (“Disposition” n.d.):

1. A person’s inherent qualities of mind and character
2. [often with infinitive] An inclination or tendency

In the case of definition 1, we propose its rhetorical use for describing essential characteristics of people as certain types (e.g., Jimmy is a [descriptor] person). In the case of definition 2, we propose its rhetorical use for ascribing tendencies or inclinations to persons in relation to a specific course of action (e.g., Connie is not the type that would do [action]). In this article, we show that particular characterological formulations (as in definition 1) are recipient designed (i.e., formulated to display an orientation to co-present others; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) to perform specific interactional and institutional tasks in the context of complaining about neighbours to dispute resolution services. This difference is underlined by DP research on dispositions, such as formulations using the modal verb would in police/suspect interviews (Edwards 2006b). For instance, when disputing testimony, the suspect indicates he ‘wouldn’ hurt an old lady,’ which works to formulate ‘something about his general disposition to act one way or another’ but also ‘provides a basis for asserting or denying a specific, disputed action’ (Edwards 2006b, p. 476). In this way, the suspect’s strategy for managing accountability orients to ‘a kind of back-dated predictability’ for which the actions in question would (or here, wouldn’t) predictably occur (Edwards 2006b, p. 497). And so, it is the dispositions of suspects that are relevant for being ascribed to a particular set of actions or activities, rather than our focus – an orientation to the essential character of persons, as types of people (insofar as actions and activities are not locally ascribed), as produced in talk-in-interaction.

Perhaps the most pertinent research aligned with our phenomenon reveals how descriptions of neighbours are formulated in various ways when callers to mediation services reports their concerns, such as through the use of character-based categories (‘nasty person,’ ‘bully’) and identity-relevant descriptions (‘slag,’ ‘parent’) (Stokoe 2009; Stokoe & Edwards 2009). Characterising neighbours this way can implicate others as morally reprehensive or in the wrong, with the inference that callers themselves are morally ‘good’ neighbours who are reporting legitimate complaints (e.g., Stokoe & Hepburn 2005; Stokoe & Wallwork 2003). Further research orients to characterological displays by revealing how callers and mediators manage what callers may have previously done to resolve neighbourhood problems prior to calling (e.g., ‘have you tried speaking to your neighbour about this?’), which is treated as both information seeking and normatively
accountable by interactants, as observed through markers of dispreference (e.g., speech perturbation, account elicitation) (Edwards & Stokoe 2007).

The important research above illustrates how characterological formulations are used as discursive resources to display people as blameworthy, innocent, or as a critique of mainstream psychology’s assumption that conduct is a consequence of underlying personality. However, while closely related, we argue that empirical research has, at least in its framing in identity and membership categorisation, somewhat overlooked how characterological formulations of ‘person’ can be deployed as rhetorical resources to pursue interactional projects. In this article, we show that when people contact services to describe their neighbourhood problems, they sometimes mobilise notions of person-types as displayed through the framing of neighbours’ actions as a result of their character and callers’ actions as a situational consequence of their neighbours’ behaviour. Importantly, characterological formulations are designed for service provision across different organisations (mediation and environmental health services) that have their own remits for providing (or rejecting) assistance (see Alexander 2018). These specific environments make relevant the morality of callers and their neighbours as particular types of people whose conduct is accountable (e.g., as good, bad, reasonable, unreasonable, neighbourly, and unneighbourly) in the disclosure and management of neighbourhood problems. In this way, callers are ostensibly in the business of displaying themselves positively and their neighbours negatively, which in turn may be a strategy for shaping the conditions for assistance to be offered. Before examining our data, however, we briefly discuss the organisations under study, ethical concerns, and analytic method.

Data and method

The dataset for the project comprised a corpus of 315 audio-recorded intake calls from community mediation services and environmental health services, both based in the United Kingdom. Remits of these organisations vary – mediation services are generally charitable bodies and encourage disputing parties to meet and resolve their differences though mediated negotiation and compromise. Environmental health services operate through local councils and commonly ask callers to keep a diary of neighbourhood problems, whilst advising neighbours they are being monitored. The data were originally collected in 2006 for a British research council-funded project on neighbour disputes. All participants consented to have their calls recorded for research purposes, and all names and other identifying features of the calls were anonymised. The data were transcribed using Jefferson’s (2004) method, which includes information about the delivery of speech, such as its pacing, overlapping talk, and intonation.

All instances of talk were analysed using DP, which examines how psychological business is managed as a member’s concern in and for interaction
(Edwards & Potter 1992a; Hepburn et al. 2007). We draw on CA’s principles of turn design, action formation, and sequence organization, which served as a methodological framework (Sacks 1992a; Sacks et al. 1974). CA and DP are inextricably linked ways of analysing the world through talk. That said, DP affords us the opportunity to identify and make empirically evidenced observations about how psychological states (e.g., stance, attitude, disposition, blame) are attributed to the self and others when complaining about neighbours (Wiggins 2017).

We identified our phenomenon from analysing transcripts from all the calls in the dataset, focusing on the rhetorical production of troubles talk. An iterative examination of the transcripts revealed that in eight cases, callers would use lexical descriptors of themselves and their neighbours as types of ‘person’ (and somewhat related characterisations such as ‘personality’ and ‘human’) as embedded within their constituent actions, and the specifics of, and patterns in, turn design (how a turn of talk was designed to do something), turn-taking (who spoke when), action formation (how actions were formed within and across turns of talk), and sequence organisation (how actions were organised in a sequence) (Schegloff 2007b). We have chosen to show four cases (as constrained by space) that most clearly and uniformly represent our phenomenon in characterising callers and neighbours as a ‘[descriptor] person’.

**Analysis**

In this section, we show how callers to mediation and environmental health services mobilise types of persons through characterological formulations in neighbourhood complaint sequences. This section has been organised to demonstrate how ‘person’ formulations are woven into complainable matters, which display the characteristics of callers ‘positively’ (i.e., as tolerant or easy going) and the character of neighbours ‘negatively’ (i.e., as obnoxious or not very reasonable) in the service of being offered aid by these institutions. Our task is to demonstrate how characterological formulations of ‘person’ are used in calls to dispute resolution services. Whilst we note the presence of many interactional features in the examples below, they may be glossed for brevity.

**Characterological formulations of callers**

Below, we reveal how the production of characterological formulations display callers to dispute resolutions services in terms of their characteristics. Callers formulate themselves as types of ‘[positive descriptor] person.’ In Extract 1, a caller (C) has contacted the environmental health service (E) to
report a neighbour having bonfires and follows a description and frequency of the problem by C.

Extract 1: EH-21

01 E: Have you spoken to them before about the bonfires.
02 C: No.
03 E: No:.
04 C: [No:] = I am an extremely tolerant:
05 E: [Mm:.
06 C: =per son who: y'know thinks well fair:
07 E: [Yeah:.
08 C: =but today:, as I came home my house was full of smoke,
09 E: Yeah:.
10 C: I could smell it up my nose and my clothes I could've cried.
11 E: [Mm.
12 C: could've cried.

Extract 1 begins with E asking whether C has confronted the neighbour about the bonfires (line 1), which is a strategy sometimes used in mediation services to establish clients' prior efforts at problem resolution (Edwards & Stokoe 2007). Following a negative response (line 2) and confirming ‘No:’ (line 3) from E, the target stretch of talk is produced by C – ‘I am an extremely tolerant person’ (lines 4, 6), potentially as a way of accounting for not talking to the neighbour. Note the similar production to Connie’s earlier characterisation of Jimmy as an ‘extremely jealous person.’ In both cases, the characters of C and Jimmy are formulated in extrematised ways as to rhetorically enhance the degree of tolerance or jealousy ascribed (that said, jealousy implicates an emotional rather than cognitive temporal state). There also appear to be similarities in how these characterological formulations are sequentially corrected – ‘Jimmy is extremely jealous’ to ‘extremely jealous person,’ whilst ‘I am ve’ (potentially ‘very’ + descriptor) is repaired to ‘I am an extremely tolerant person’ in this case. C’s ‘tolerance’ is conditionally displayed through the remainder of the turn – as a reasonable person ‘who: y’know thinks well fair enough.’ Observe the orientation to common knowledge with ‘y’know which orients to shared, affiliative category membership (Edwards & Mercer 1987; Stokoe 2012). Also note the reported thought, which can be considered as a resource for managing rational accountability (Barnes & Moss 2007). Yet C formulates her emotional, situational attentiveness regarding the consequences of the neighbour’s unreasonable actions with ‘I could’ve cried’ (lines 11, 13), in this way,
providing a neat rhetorical contrast between a fleeting emotional state (i.e., crying) and C’s restrained character (i.e., tolerant).

In Extract 2, C is calling an environmental health service to report loud noise from the neighbour’s house, and begins after C has outlined the nature of the concern.

Extract 2: EH-132b

01 C: Well basically (.) there’s a ‘eck of a racket coming 02 from next door.=And it’s been going on now for six 03 weeks.=.hh Now I’ m, (.). I’m quite an (.). easy going 04 sort of person.=.hh um But they’ ve got h:am:mers an’ 05 things like (.). well basically it’s hammering.=.hhh um 06 (.). at half past eight in the morning.

Extract 2 starts with a well-prefaced turn (a marker of potential nonstraightforwardness) in which C describes the loudness of the noise, its proximity, and the length of time (lines 1–3). Notably, the target stretch of talk is initiated by a now-preface (line 3), which may display disaffiliation with the recipient (Waring 2012). Compared to Extract 1, the design of the characterological formulation arguably moderates (through the use of ‘quite’ and ‘sort of’) C’s self-characterisation as easy going – ‘I’m quite an (.). easy going sort of person.’ (lines 3–4). However, the use of ‘quite’ in this instance may be as an ‘intensifier’ which boosts the rhetorical strength of C’s characterisation (Athanasiadou 2007), particularly in the context of displaying oneself positively when making the case for assistance. The subsequent use of ‘but’ (line 4) seemingly emphasises the contrast between the easy going-ness of C and the conduct of neighbours. As with Extract 1, the occasioned use of a characterological formulation is an accountable matter – here, displayed through C’s description of the neighbour’s egregious actions, and the time it occurs (lines 4–6). In general, then, the somewhat delicate framing of C as ‘easy going’ provides a contrast with the extreme and persistent noise from the neighbour’s property.

In their own way, the cases above illustrate how the character of callers can be mobilised when describing neighbourhood concerns. Significantly, characterological formulations occasioned accounts which negatively evaluate the actions and activities of neighbours, which implicate the conduct of neighbours as being responsible for callers’ situational actions (i.e., contacting a dispute resolution service) and not the character of the callers themselves. It might also be that these formulations are designed to manage potential resistance from call-takers (i.e., from being seen as complaining about neighbours rather than the consequences of their conduct). The potential for grantability of assistance is ostensibly more
likely if neighbourhood problems fall within the remit of the organisations contacted.

In the following examples, we show how characterological formulations are ascribed to callers’ neighbours in calls to dispute resolution services.

**Characterological formulations of neighbours**

In this section, we show two cases which demonstrate how characterological formulations invoke the character of neighbours through ‘[negative descriptor] person’ formulations. Extract 3 originates from the same call as Extract 1 (and occurs just after Extract 1), in which C is calling the environmental health service to report the neighbours having bonfires.

**Extract 3: EH-21**

01 C: He said they’ve got another bonfire, he said the
02 clo:thes look at the clothes and they s::mel– I’ve had
03 to W::ASH (0.4) tI hem all: agai:n=.HHh Now the sun’s s=
04 E: [ Uh:.
05 C: =shining an: I dare: not– I ↑ca:n’t put them out because
06 [ this s:me ll is still there and there’s still bits=
07 E: [ Mm:.
08 C: =th’t ’re .hh mcht .h flyin’ around.=Well he– my son
09 went down he was that ↑angry, [.hhH and he’s rather=
10 E: [ Mm hm,
11 C: =an obnoxious person, [.hh mcht an:d um he was=
12 E: [ Mm hm,
13 C: =they’ d got a heap of of ↑wood they were burning.

Following a characterisation of the extent of smoke damage, and concerns with hanging washing out, C describes her son who ‘went down he was that ↑angry’ (line 9) to see the neighbour. Significantly, by invoking emotion-relevant descriptions such as ‘angry,’ C can be seen as characterising the ‘son’ (with its own family category-relevance) as reacting to events as they unfold in a way that is nondisposed to violence (Edwards 1995). This temporal emotion-talk seemingly sets up a contrast with the subsequent characterological formulation ‘he’s rather an obnoxious person,’ (lines 9, 11), which presumably is a reference to C’s neighbour. As with Extracts 1 and 2, the neighbour’s conduct is made relevant – in this case, burning ‘a heap of of ↑wood’ (line 13) as an observable way of demonstrating the extent the neighbour’s obnoxiousness. Also, as with previous examples, the caller’s actions and emotional state is implicated as a situational consequence of the neighbour’s conduct.
In the final example, C is calling a mediation service to report knocking sounds from a neighbour’s property. C has just finished describing the nature of the problem to the mediator (M).

Extract 4: EC-41

01 C: Because apparently um: (0.5) a- a maintenance man went upstairs.
02 M: Mm hm,
03 C: Because um: because (0.2) uh they thought because the council thought that the knocking I was talkin’ about might be due to the (.) to:[ : ( )
05 M: [ The plumbing.
06 (.)
07 M: Yeah.=
08 (.)
09 C: =Yes.= .hh Well (.) he went up there and apparently she was: she started swearing at him and carrying on.
11 (.)
12 M: Mm::.
13 C: But you know she’s not a very reasonable pers[ on.=
14 M: [ Mcht .hh
15 C: And[ um: (.) wha- what it what happens as well is that=
16 M: [ Uh
18 C: =when she goes out she leaves the the partner to do it.

Extract 4 starts with some scene setting such as C’s previous contact with the council and the noise being disregarded as a plumbing problem. Significantly, the maintenance man provides corroboration for C’s complaint, and it is the maintenance man who receives verbal abuse from the neighbour (lines 10–11). Following a hearably empathic/aligning ‘Mm::’ from M (line 13), C produces a contrastive but-initial turn, orienting to common knowledge (‘you know’), followed by the mobilisation of the neighbour’s character with ‘she’s just not a very reasonable person’ (line 14). As with the cases above, an account is produced by C subsequent to the characterological formulation which underpins the neighbour’s unreasonable character – the partner is left to do ‘it’ (although it is unclear what it refers to) when she goes out (lines 16, 18).

As with earlier mobilisations of callers’ characters, the invocation of neighbours as particular types of people is treated by speakers as accountable through negative assessments of neighbours’ conduct or the consequences of their actions. This, in turn, serves to underpin and shape the characterological business being formulated in these examples – essentially, that neighbours have specific (negative) characteristics, and callers’ responses (e.g., contacting dispute resolution services) are reasonable, justified consequences.
Conclusion

This article examines how characterological formulations can be used to describe or invoke the character of persons in ways that supplement DP’s programme of research on everyday interaction. Much of DP (and CA) has attended to characterological formulations of persons, framed mostly as the study of identity and membership categorisation in the construction of social actions (e.g., complaints, denials) across multiple institutional settings. Our article is aligned to that tradition but extends further into how characterological ‘[descriptor] person’ formulations may be mobilised through the production of actions in calls environmental health and mediation services in the United Kingdom. In so doing, we have shown how callers to these services characterise themselves and their neighbours in terms of their positive and negative characteristics, and thus how complaints (and defences against complaints) are shot through with these lexical utterances. Further, we have shown how callers attend to the accountably of their talk as regular ways of managing characterological formulations of self and neighbour.

The interactional environments in our dataset are particular in that when people contact dispute resolution services, they are not just calling to complain but to ask that something should be done to solve their neighbourhood concerns (e.g., Alexander & Stokoe 2019; Alexander 2018; Edwards & Stokoe 2007; Stokoe 2009; Stokoe & Edwards 2009; Stokoe & Hepburn 2005). The occasioned use of characterological formulations is relevant for showing how speakers mobilise the character of persons in ways that display themselves and their neighbours in ostensibly favourable or unfavourable ways – as inherently good or bad people (e.g., Stokoe 2006; Stokoe & Wallwork 2003). In this way, invoking notions of members’ specific characteristics might be an action-oriented strategy that callers use in their attempts to influence call-takers to take their side in pursuit of their own agendas and goal-oriented interests, particularly as these disputes tend to be, by their nature, adversarial matters within communities.

By striving to situate the occasioned use of ‘[descriptor] person’ formulations as a novel phenomenon, we do not understare the depth and variety of closely related social scientific research, as highlighted through the important studies summarised above. However, while matters of personality, personhood, and uses of the lexical ‘person’ have been well-examined through their rhetorical use, we argue that our phenomenon has, to date, been overlooked – essentially that ‘[descriptor] person’ utterances are designed to do specific interactional work when complaining about others. We have endeavoured to illustrate how characterological formulations can be mobilised as resources in distinct ways through talk-in-interaction and how ‘[descriptor] person’ utterances are made relevant in calls to dispute resolution organisations in the service of assistance being granted. Further, we propose that our findings can supplement the research on complaints as a particular resource for action in ways that are
relevant for displaying the morality of self and others in mundane and institutional contexts (e.g., Drew 1998; Drew & Heritage 1992; Edwards 2005).

This Special Issue provides a propitious opportunity to make relevant the kind of traditional psychological work that underpins DP’s programme of respecification in ways that are related to our phenomenon. We (tentatively) note the relevance of research examining ‘environmental vs. dispositional’ attribution (Heider 1958; Whyte 1943) that helped shape the later concept of ‘actor-observer’ bias (Jones & Nisbett 1971). As shown in the instances above, the actions of callers are framed as a situational consequence of the neighbours conduct, whilst the neighbours’ actions are as a result of their underlying character. Further, characterological formulations of persons in our data can be seen in terms of objects/people as organised wholes, in the Gestalt sense of ‘a concrete individual and characteristic entity, existing as something detached and having a shape or form as one of its attributes’ (Köhler 1929, p. 148).\textsuperscript{2} Formulations of self and other can be designed to be treated as encompassing what it is to be a certain type of person, as occasioned through talk, which may have consequences for the provision of service in these institutional encounters.

**Notes**

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2 In turn, this concept was developed by Wittgenstein in his ‘private language argument’ to comprise the mental constructs of persons rather than objects as physical entities (Wittgenstein 1953).

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**Notes on contributors**

*Marc Alexander* is a Research Fellow at Loughborough University, who is using discursive psychology and conversation analysis to examine helpline calls from people in crisis. He is
currently interested in the interactional function of (non) lexical emotion displays in calls to a housing charity helpline.

Elizabeth Stokoe is Professor of Social Interaction at Loughborough University. She uses conversation analysis as the basis for understanding effective communicative practice across many institutional settings, and developed the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method to turn findings into training.

ORCID

Marc Alexander http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9313-7756
Elizabeth Stokoe http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7353-4121

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