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Title: Counter-Denunciations : How Suspects Blame Victims in Police Interviews for Low-Level Crimes

Year: 2024

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Ferraz de Almeida, F. (2024). Counter-Denunciations : How Suspects Blame Victims in Police Interviews for Low-Level Crimes. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 37(1), 119-137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-023-10060-9>



Counter-Denunciations: How Suspects Blame Victims in Police Interviews for Low-Level Crimes

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Accepted: 25 September 2023
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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which suspects attempt to make putative victims/complainants at least partially responsible for the incidents for which they are investigated, transforming themselves into the victim and the other into the perpetrator. Drawing upon conversation analysis, I examine audio-recorded police interviews for low-level crimes in England and in which suspects have constructed what I refer as counter-denunciations. I argue that suspects accomplish these counter-denunciations through discursive practices that involve, for example (a) contrasting the complainant's actions with their own innocent conduct; (b) historicizing the event being investigated; and (c) discrediting the complainant's character—stigmatizing. These practices have in common the suspects' reliance on the relational and contextual character of the categories 'offender' and 'victim'.

Keywords Police interviews · Criminal offences · Suspects · Counter-denunciation · Defensive strategies · Victim-blaming · Conversation analysis

1 Introduction

People arrested on suspicion of having committed a criminal offence are generally interviewed by the police about the circumstances of and their involvement in the alleged offence, before a decision can be made whether to prosecute the suspect, and if so on what charge (i.e., for what formal and specific

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crime, according to the relevant legal code). This applies to the legal system in England and Wales—the system that is the context and focus of this study—and also in very many jurisdictions worldwide [1–3]. At any rate, in the English criminal legal system, before formally charging a suspect, police question suspects about the incident—about what happened and what led up to the incident, about the suspect’s conduct and their frame of mind; in other words, they interview the suspect about whatever might be relevant to discovering, from the suspects account, whether their conduct was such as to support bringing a criminal charge, and if so, what charge should be brought against the suspect.

During this period of police questioning, suspects adopt what can generally be regarded as defensive strategies, which can include outright *denials*, e.g. through claims of mistaken identity, claims to have been elsewhere, or that whilst they were present and witnessed what happened, they were merely bystanders; *justifications* for their conduct, including denials that their conduct was wrong, for instance that they acted in self-defense; or they may *excuse* their conduct, for instance having acted under duress or when suffering from a mental disorder. Even though these distinctions between denials, justification and excuses [4] seem clearly to differentiate legal categories of defense, they may not capture precisely how suspects respond to officers’ questions, and their discursive defense strategies in answering these questions in police interviews. For example, suspects may employ a defensive strategy in which they attempt to mitigate or shift the blame on themselves by blaming the other—by denouncing the complainant or putative victim, as in this case in which a suspect is being questioned about an incident for which he has been arrested:

(1) [PN-59] (S is accused of criminal damage to a car)

1 PO1: Okay .hhh well (.) tell- you tell me (.) what you did last night

2 (0.2) sa:y (1.3) >j- just tell me< your circumstances of events

3 last night.

4 (0.3)

5 S: My whole day?

6 (0.3)

7 PO1: Yeah.

8 (0.4)

9 S: **I went to the football, (0.4) Borroway City game.**

10 PO1: Uh-huh

11 (0.5)

12 S: **I came home, (0.2) with my partner, (0.4) and two children, (2.1)**

13 **There was a lot of noise going off outside (.) from**

14 **(0.5)**

15 PO1: What time was that?

16 (0.8)

17 S: **Er::: about half past seven (2.6) pm (2.5) There was a lot of**

18 **noise going off outside, I went out to see what was going off**

19 **(1.2) and I had some abuse out of the window (.) from Te:d (1.2)**

20 **and his girlfriend.**

((15 lines omitted))

36 PO1: What uhm:: (0.9) what was- what words were exchanged then

37 (0.5)

38 PO1: when you two were talkin'

39 (0.3)

40 PO1: >at that time<,

41 (0.3)

42 S: **We've had a runnin' dispute ever since we've lived there.**

43 (1.3)

44 PO1: How long have you lived there for?

45 (1.7)

46 S: This- (0.2) about two years ago (0.2) this month (0.8) about two

47 years (0.8) just over two years

48 PO1: °Hm'

49 (1.4)

50 S: **An' from day one he's just been a nightmare neighbour.**

51 (1.0)

52 PO1: In what respect, I mean- (0.2) wh- wh- what goes on- I don- I

53 don't know what goes on {between-

54 S: [Loud music, (.) dis:cos, parties,

55 barbecues:,

56 (0.2)

57 S: **threateni:ng,**

58 (2.1)

59 S: **callin' my wife (0.2) >well not my wife< my partner (.) a Pa:ki**

60 **bas:tard**

61 (1.3)

61 S: **his daughter picks on my daughter at school,**

62 (0.8)

63 PO1: °Hm'

64 (1.5)

65 S: **He:- that caravan outside's a running youth club,**

66 (1.5)

67 S: **As far as I know there's underage drinking and drugs go off in the**

68 **house, I don't know if he's a drug- drug dealer.**

69 PO1: .hh so how long ehm:

70 (0.2)

71 S: **He steal- he stole out of my garage.**

((S continues to list items that he alleges his neighbour stole from his garage))

The suspect in this case had been arrested for criminal damage. His initial response to the accusation was simply to explicitly deny having damaged his neighbour's vehicle (not shown here). However, when asked by the interviewing police officer (PO1) about the circumstances of the event, the suspect builds a narrative in which the putative victim is depicted as the one who initiated the incident (lines 19–20). Following that, the suspect constructs a version that involved historicizing the single episode (line 42) and attributing a 'spoiled identity' to the victim (line 50), in addition to listing a series of episodes of misconduct on the part of his neighbour (lines 54–71). The complainant, i.e., the putative victim, had denounced the suspect to the police, alleging that he (the suspect) had damaged his car. The suspect counters this allegation by constructing a version of events in which he, the one being questioned on suspicion of committing an offence, is actually the victim of the complainant's (and his partner's) abusive conduct.

The extract above illustrates some of the multiple ways through which a suspect may achieve what we are referring to as a *counter-denunciation*, a discursive defensive strategy sometimes used by those accused of wrongdoing 'to undermine the discrediting implications of the accusation by attacking the actions, motives and/or character of one's accusers' ([5], p. 156). In other words, suspects can defend themselves against an accusation by blaming the putative victims for the incident and then making them either wholly or at least partially responsible for 'what happened'. Although there has been research on the ways through which suspects respond to the accusations that are made against them and defend themselves in police interviews and interrogations [6–8], language and discourse studies of counter-denunciations have been rather restricted to the analysis of research interview material conducted with (former) offenders, in cases concerning domestic violence and rape, in which the strategy is often referred as 'blaming the victim' or 'victim-blaming' [9, 10]. In this paper, I will adopt the term counter-denunciation in order to avoid the association that 'blaming the victim' often has to sexual crimes; counter-denunciation is more generic and hence more applicable to the data analysed here, police interviews with suspects in crimes involving low tariff offences, particularly in the context of neighbours' disputes. In this sense, I borrow the term from Emerson [5], who identified counter-denunciations as a general defensive strategy used by alleged young offenders in juvenile courtrooms. The author formulates a definition for that defensive strategy and presents a series of illustrative examples to discuss its use in the process of establishing the moral character of young offenders. The study nonetheless did not explore the linguistic resources mobilized by participants for constructing this particular defensive strategy in talk-in-interaction. I argue that counter-denunciations are achieved through a variety of discursive practices, whether employed individually or in combination. I propose to examine how suspects manage and construct these counter-denunciations in police investigative interviews, that is, the ways through which suspects defend themselves through denouncing the other, i.e., the accuser/complainant/putative victim. I argue that these practices involve, for example: (a) contrasting the complainant's actions with their own innocent conduct; (b) historicizing the event being investigated; and (c) discrediting the complainant's character—stigmatizing. In the conclusion, I suggest that these

discursive practices can be used individually or in combination, and discuss the limitations associated to the nature of the cases in my data set.

2 Data and Methods

This research draws upon audio-recordings of 27 police investigative interviews with suspects in a police station in England, produced as a standard police procedure. They were originally collected by other researchers as part of a project on neighbour disputes [11, 12]. All names and other identifying information were pseudonymised at source. For this paper, I have identified episodes of counter-denunciations in four interviews and the extracts presented here were selected because they best illustrate the multiple ways through which this defensive strategy is accomplished, and the discursive and interactional resources mobilized in each practice¹. These extracts were transcribed according to the conventions widely used in conversation analysis (henceforth CA) [13]. The analysis draws upon CA for uncovering the ways in which suspects rely on these practices for producing counter-denunciations, and thereby make visible the accountability of descriptions and social actions associated with this phenomenon in social interaction ([14], p. 75).

The recordings I analyse involve disputes between neighbours and are from cases in which the suspects have been arrested in connection with their involvement in relatively minor (low tariff) offences, ranging from threatening behaviour and harassment to criminal damage and assault. Although these are not the remarkable and dramatic cases featured in newspapers and television documentaries, they are hugely relevant to the construction of law-in-action in our society as they represent the most ordinary and mundane work in the context of the criminal justice system in England.² In what follows, I will present and analyse in detail each of the three discursive practices through which suspects accomplish counter-denunciations. For reasons of space, I will begin the analytical sections by referring to the case presented in the introduction, followed by one or two examples to illustrate each particular practice.

3 Contrasting the Complainant's Culpability with Self's Innocence

The case presented in the introduction offers a comprehensive view of counter-denunciations. It reveals a series of descriptive practices through which suspects denounce their complainants and thereby attempt to shift away from themselves or mitigate blame for the original criminal accusation. One of these practices is visible in the initial part of the extract, in which the suspect constructs a narrative

¹ All extracts that have been included in this article come from my PhD thesis.

² For the latest statistics on type and volume of crimes received and processed through the criminal system from April to June 2022 in England and Wales, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-court-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2022>.

through which he exhibits his own innocence, before contrasting it with the complainant's behaviour.

(from extract 1) [PN-59] (S is accused of criminal damage to a car)

1 PO1: Okay .hhh well (.) tell- you tell me (.) what you did last night
 2 (0.2) sa:y (1.3) >j- just tell me< your circumstances of events
 3 last night.
 4 (0.3)

5 S: My whole day?
 6 (0.3)

7 PO1: Yeah.
 8 (0.4)

9 S: **I went to the football, (0.4) Borroway City game.**

10 PO1: Uh-huh
 11 (0.5)

12 S: **I came home, (0.2) with my partner, (0.4) and two children, (2.1)**
 13 **There was a lot of noise going off outside (.) from**
 14 (0.5)

15 PO1: What time was that?
 16 (0.8)

17 S: → **Er::: about half past seven (2.6) pm (2.5) There was a lot of**
 18 **noise going off outside, I went out to see what was going off**
 19 **(1.2) and I had some abuse out of the window (.) from Te:d (1.2)**
 20 **and his girlfriend.**

When invited to talk about his circumstances of events in the previous night, the suspect builds a description of a series of activities he was involved prior to the incident. He had arrived home with his family, after attending a football match, and had noticed a lot of noise coming from outside his house. When the suspect initially introduces the problematic event in line 13 and repeats it in lines 17–18, (“There was a lot of noise going off outside”), he does so without revealing the source or the agent responsible for this first malicious action. It is only after making clear that he acted as an innocent and reasonable person, i.e., a person who had just come home with his family (line 12) and who, after being disturbed by a lot of noise, went to check what was happening outside (line 18), that he finally refers to the potential offender. This description sets the scene for the escalation of the problematic event (“and I had some abuse out of the window”, line 19), the responsibility for which is attributed to his neighbours (“from Ted (1.2) and his girlfriend”, lines 19–20). In his initial account, the suspect establishes a contrast between his *own innocent conduct*, which is conveyed by the ordinariness of the scene depicted, and the *complainant's culpable behaviour*, indicated especially by the rupture of that ordinariness, i.e., the abuse from his neighbours, which seemed to have come unexpectedly and for no apparent reason.

A similar practice is also visible in the following extract, referring to a case in which the suspect and his wife were arrested for having threatened and abused their next-door neighbour. The sequence below occurred in the early phase of the interview. The police officer had introduced the interview and cautioned the suspect and then started asking questions about what happened that particular night, soliciting his side of the story. i.e., from the perspective of the accused.

- (2) [PN-13] (S is accused of threatening and abusive behaviour)
- 1 PO1: Obviously (1.5) what- >something's happened< tonight Frank=
 2 S: =Ri:gh[t,
 3 PO1: [>There was a-< there was an incident before I (0.4)
 4 arri:ved (0.3) .hh at Guntley Street.
 5 S: Mhm=
 6 PO1: =>And what I'd like you to do< if possible (1.0) is to tell me
 7 your side of the story as to what's happened tonight °please° or
 8 last night.
 9 (2.3)
 10 S: **Right (.) the- the way I see it (1.4) we're all watching the**
 11 **football (1.6) It- (0.6) my wife (.) >myself and my daughter<**
 12 **(0.5) i:n- in my hou:se (2.0) uh:: (1.4) when it finished (0.3)**
 13 **there was a lot of ba:nging (0.6) going on (.) from next door**
 14 **(1.0) >which has been< happening quite a lot (0.2) recently (1.4)**
 15 **an:d uh:: (1.7) for what reason, I don't know (0.4) for whatever**
 16 **reason (.) she's doing all this banging (0.9) I- I feel it's to**
 17 **wi:nd my wife up (1.0) but I- I don't get involved in it (2.0)**
 18 **.hhh having a few drinks tonight (0.2) watching the football (.)**
 19 **it was getting louder and louder .hh (0.2) football finishes**
 20 **(0.5) goes round (1.5) to say (0.8) >"enough of the banging"< (.)**
 21 **because >it was on the wall< (0.4) It was uh:- it was like**
 22 **banging on the wall (2.7) Went round to ask her (0.7) to keep it**
 23 **down,**

The suspect's initial account conveys a contrast between the completely *innocent behaviour* of him and his family and the *reprehensible conduct* of the complainant, who unexpectedly and hence without a reasonable motive, appears and breaks the domestic orderly scene. The suspect depicts himself as being involved in an innocent ordinary scene in which he and his family members engage in activities that are often easily accounted for in terms of nothing special was happening; it is just a domestic scene in which an ordinary man is watching a football match on the TV with his family. In this way, the suspect is 'doing being ordinary', that is, he is constructing a description of his life and events in such a way that it highlights their mundane, unremarkable and unproblematic features ([15], pp. 413–429).

The work to design an innocent, ordinary scene begins with the suspect's statement "we're all watching football" (lines 10–11) but it is the self-repair that comes

subsequently that uncovers the relevance of the sense of the ordinariness that the suspect is conveying through his description. After the cut-off (“It-”, which is presumably referring to ‘football’) and the 0.6 s pause in line 11, we see a change from “we’re all” (line 10) to “my wife (.) <myself and my daughter> i:n—in my hou:se” (lines 11–12). The self-repair exposes the suspect’s effort to design his narrative and convey more effectively [16], in this case, his innocence. The insertion, which includes the family members, is a qualified version of the previous description, i.e. ‘we all’. The importance of this insertion is that by detailing who was there and where, it shows that it is ‘a family in their house’, doing nothing but watching TV, which enhances the sense the suspect is designing his turn to make it clear the ordinariness and the family-character of the scene. By examining the design of this turn, one can see how the suspect takes the trouble to display that ‘we’ is a family unit, not just a ‘group of people’.

The innocent and ordinary behaviour of the suspect and his family is then contrasted with what his neighbours were doing and how their conduct disrupted this ordinary scene. The rupture of the ordinary (innocent) and the emergence of the extraordinary (misconduct) is conveyed for example by the emphasis the suspect puts on the words that *intensify* the problem, i.e., the intensifying expression ‘a lot’ and the lexical choice in ‘banging’ (line 13). Prior to that point in his description, due to the use of impersonal or agentless constructions such as ‘there was’ (line 13) or ‘going on’ (lines 13) it is not possible to identify who was the individual doing the ‘banging’, although the suspect locates the problematical action as coming ‘from next door’ (line 13). The agency of the problematic action becomes clear when the suspect describes the ‘banging’ as done by a woman (‘she’, line 16), in that case, his neighbour, who had been mentioned by the officer previously in the interview.

The extract shows that part of the suspect’s work for constructing the other’s culpability—and completing a counter-denunciation—involves also describing what they themselves were doing in order to promote a version in which they mitigate their responsibility for what happened. In the case mentioned above, the suspect uses the phrase “having a few drinks tonight (0.2) watching football” to characterize what he was doing when the victim started to make all the noise. He seems then to anticipate a possible version sustained by the victim: that he was drunk and that generates credibility to a story in which he threatened her. As a way to avoid that, he designs this part of his account using a construction which normalised his conduct. ‘A few’ are not many or too many; having drinks is not being drunk. The same effort is visible when he describes his conduct after hearing the ‘banging’ as ‘I went round to ask her to keep it down’ (lines 22–23). In his version, although the neighbour was performing a wrongful act, he kept control of himself and responded in a manner that was not hostile nor intended to escalate the initial dispute. He did not go there to ‘shut the music off’ or to ‘order them to stop the banging’. In other words, he did not go there to cause trouble, even after being disturbed by the neighbour and the loud noise coming from next-door. His description conveys a rather rational and sensible approach to the problem, which helps him to portray himself as the actual victim, not the offender. By setting the scene and describing an ordinary background for an extraordinary event [17], the suspect contrasts his self-innocent conduct with the other-malicious behaviour, and promotes a version in which his alleged wrongful act

(threatening and abusing the neighbour) has to be re-contextualized as a response to the perceived ‘trouble’ (the recurrent banging on the wall) arising from the claimant’s conduct.

In both extracts, suspects do not identify from the start who was causing trouble; they don’t say ‘X was making some noise’ or ‘X and Y verbally abused me’. They don’t blame the other person straightaway; they rather de-agentify the action by using impersonal, agentless constructions such as “there was a lot of noise” or “there was a lot of banging” [18]. In these cases, the suspects cast their mind back to the time when they were experiencing that problem and do not attribute the agency of the malicious action to a particular individual. Suspects are not immediately jumping to conclusions; they design a description in which the extraordinariness or abnormality is conveyed by this unknown source of the problem. By describing the malicious action, i.e., banging, noise, further from the beginning of their narrative, and by using these impersonal (or existential) constructions, suspects emphasize the problem, before identifying the person responsible for it and completing the counter-denunciation by implicitly contrasting their conduct and the complainant’s reaction to that.

The *contrastive device* [19, 20] between the self’s innocent conduct and the other’s transgressive behaviour is also visible in the following extract involving a case of altercation between neighbours. The suspect is being asked by an officer about the altercation she had with her next-door neighbour, which resulted in a hammer being thrown and damaging his door.

- (3) [PN-23] (S is accused of causing criminal damage to a house door)
- 1 PO1: Okay. (0.3) Can you giv- you tell me (.) exactly what happened, =
- 2 S: =.hh Mmm (.) my children was playing (.) on my front steps (0.5)
- 3 just outside my front door ‘cos I’ve got three steps leading up to
- 4 my front door, they were sitting on my steps (.) .hhh Mmm they
- 5 was talking (.) to another boy, I think his name is Ja:cob, mm and
- 6 they was talking to the lad (0.4) next door, <Marshall,> I don’t
- 7 °know his last name though°. Mmm (1.1) .hhh then all of a sudden I
- 8 heard shou:ting (1.4) so I went out to see what were going on.
- 9 (0.6) Jonah was on his front doorstep (0.2) shouting and abusing,
- 10 shouting at my children, ‘cos he could hear them laughing. (0.4)
- 11 >They weren’t making too much noise.< they were just laughing and
- 12 joking.

The ordinariness of the scene is conveyed through the inclusion of components such as the people involved (“my children”, line 2; “another boy”, line 5, “Jacob”, line 5, “the lad next door”, line 6; “Marshall”, line 6), the actions being performed (“playing”, line 2; “sitting”, line 4; “talking”, lines 5 and 6) and the place where it all happened (“on my steps”, line 4; “just outside my front door”, line 3). The description of the scene is one in which some children, including the suspect’ own, were performing typical childish activities—playing, sitting, and talking—at home. (On the

use of such ‘category-bound activities’ as children and playing, and the relevance of category-bound activities for the construction of descriptions of ordinary, commonplace scenes, see Sacks [15, 21]. It is worth noticing how the suspect emphasises the possessive pronoun, “my”, highlighting the importance of showing that the children were in a familiar territory.

The ordinariness of the scene is then disrupted by an external element, in that case, the complainant/putative victim, who, “all of a sudden” (line 7), started “shouting” and “abusing” the suspect’s children. The other side of the contrast is then conveyed by components such as the actions being performed (“shouting”, line 8; “shouting and abusing”, line 9), an unreasonable and disproportionate motive (“cause he could hear them laughing and joking”, lines 11–12), and especially, the temporality involved in the abrupt transition from the ordinary to the extraordinary, explicitly marked in this case by “then all of the sudden” (line 7). Closely connected to what I discussed in the analysis of the previous two extracts, here in extract (3), the suspect describes the series of events as if they were unfolding at the time of the interview, thus not initially attributing to anyone the agency of the malicious action. However, unlike in those cases, in which the suspects temporarily hid the identity of the offender by using impersonal (or existential) constructions (“there was a lot of noise” or “there was a lot of banging”), here in extract (3), this is done using an experiential verb (“I heard shouting”, lines 7–8). The extraordinary character of the complainant (portrayed by the suspect as the offender) is further emphasized by describing how the suspect reacted to the shouting: she went down to see what was happening and then identified the person responsible for the reprehensible action (lines 8–9). The suspect’s version contextualizes the incident and the criminal damage for which she is being accused; her actions are a response to what she perceived as trouble, that is, in response to the suspect’s transgressive behaviour towards her children, who were innocently conducting their mundane activities.

As we can see, one of the practices through which suspects can achieve a counter-denunciation in police interviews involves *establishing a contrast between the suspect’s own innocent conduct and the complainant’s malicious behaviour*. In the cases examined in this section, this was accomplished primarily through a contrastive device between the ordinariness of the scene in which the suspect and/or their family are participants, and the extraordinary character of the action(s) that disrupts the order and transform the innocent and mundane scene into a problem—in those cases, transgressions, or potential criminal offences.

4 Historicizing the Single Incident

A second discursive practice through which suspects may accomplish counter-denunciations involves historicizing the event being investigated. In extract 1, in which the suspect was being accused of damaging his neighbour’s vehicle, he was asked by the police about ‘what happened’, to which he answered through a narrative that, among other things, depicted his neighbour (victim/complainant) as the one who had initiated the incident, a verbal altercation that resulted in the criminal offence being investigated.

(from extract 1) [PN-59] (S is accused of criminal damage to a car)

36 PO1: What uhm:: (0.9) what was- what words were exchanged then
 37 (0.5)

38 PO1: when you two were talkin'
 39 (0.3)

40 PO1: >at that time<,
 41 (0.3)

42 S: → **We've had a runnin' dispute ever since we've lived there.**
 43 (1.3)

44 PO1: How long have you lived there for?
 45 (1.7)

46 S: This- (0.2) about two years ago (0.2) this month (0.8) about two
 47 years (0.8) just over two years

48 PO1: °Hm°
 49 (1.4)

50 S: → **An' from day one he's just been a nightmare neighbour.**

The extract begins with the police officer asking a probing question about the verbal exchange he had just mentioned in the previous turns (data not shown). Despite the officer having referred to the verbal altercation that happened between the two neighbours at a particular time (note the two increments in lines 38 and 40, which followed the non-response by the suspect in the preceding turns), the suspect produces a transformative response [22] in line 42, which shifts the agenda of the interaction [23] and allows him to gain some control over the talk [24]. Instead of providing more detail about the event in question by listing or mentioning the words that were exchanged at that time, he offers a description that portrays the incident embedded in a 'running dispute', which *historicizes the single incident*. In doing so, he highlights the significance of the single incident in regard to what has happened in the past. From the suspect's perspective, an adequate account of the event being investigated must be understood in terms of a historical pattern that goes back to the time when the two individuals became neighbours.

In selecting these descriptions to characterise the complainant's conduct, the suspect attempts to put the incident in a *historicized context*, making it part of a bigger picture. For the suspect, the single incident should be interpreted as the outcome of an ongoing larger neighbourhood dispute for which the complainant should also be made accountable. An accurate interpretation of the incident—at least from the suspect's perspective—depends on this exercise of historicizing it: the situation is an ongoing problem and it has been happening for a long time -note the use of the present perfect to refer to the dispute in line 42 "we've had..." and to the neighbour's behaviour in line 50, "and from day one he's just been...").

This effort to depict the event as embedded in an *historical context of ongoing and recurrent misconduct* is also visible in extract (3), partially reproduced below,

and which refers to the case of a suspect and his wife being questioned about their allegedly threatening and abusive behaviour towards a next-door neighbour.

(from extract 2) [PN-13] (S is accused of threatening and abusive behaviour)

6 PO1: =>And what I'd like you to do< if possible (1.0) is to tell me
7 your side of the story as to what's happened tonight °please° or
8 last night.
9 (2.3)

10 S: Right (.) the- the way I see it (1.4) we're all watching the
11 football (1.6) It- (0.6) my wife (.) >myself and my daughter<
12 (0.5) i:n- in my hou:se (2.0) uh:: (1.4) when it finished (0.3)
13 there was a lot of ba:nging (0.6) going on (.) from next door
14 **(1.0) >which has been< happening quite a lot (0.2) recently (1.4)**
15 an:d uh::: (1.7) for what reason, I don't know (0.4) for whatever
16 reason (.) she's doing all this ba:nging (0.9) I- I feel it's to
17 wi:nd my wife up (1.0) but I- I don't get involved in it (2.0)
18 .hhh having a few drinks tonight (0.2) watching the football (.)
19 it was getting louder and louder .hh (0.2) football finishes
20 (0.5) goes round (1.5) to say (0.8) >"enough of the banging"< (.)
21 because >it was on the wall< (0.4) It was uh:- it was like
22 banging on the wall (2.7) Went round to ask her (0.7) to keep it
23 down,

In this extract, the suspect relies on the considerable latitude provided by the officer's question to historicize the single event. Halfway through his narrative about the events of the previous night, and after describing that he had noticed excessive noise coming from next door, the suspect qualifies this transgressive action as *ongoing* and *recurrent* ("which has been happening quite a lot recently", line 14). The positioning of the insertion in the midst of the narrative and immediately after the description of the problematical action, i.e. the banging, works to disguise the reference to the broader temporal context while displaying his adherence to the agenda set by the officer's initial question. It also provides sufficient grounds for the suspect to attribute a reason for what his neighbour has been doing, that is, if he had only described the event as a single incident, it would have been harder to ascribe a malicious motive to the complainant's conduct ("to wind my wife up", lines 16–17). The recurrent and ongoing character of the complainant's behaviour provides the grounds for the action to be accountable as a *provocation*. The suspect's conduct is then seen as a response to a series of wrongdoings committed by the complainant.

The officers' initial question in both extracts are about particular aspects of events that occurred in a particular time, but the suspects in each case choose instead to address the *historical circumstances of the single incident*. As we have seen, this is done either by directly resisting to the question agenda (as in extract 1) or by subtly qualifying the problem when adhering to the agenda set by the officer (as in extract 2). In both cases, the suspect moves beyond the parameters of the question

by describing things that are not specifically requested by the questioner ([25], pp. 413–414) but which are portrayed as essential to correctly understand the event under investigation.

5 Discrediting the Complainant's Character: Stigmatizing

In addition to contrasting the complainant's culpability with the suspect's self-innocence, and historicizing the single event, counter-denunciations can also involve the use of categorization to discredit the other's character and stigmatize [26] the complainant. In these cases, suspects employ particular categories as discursive resources to construct their defensive strategy and denounce the complainant for their wrongful behaviour, while mitigating their own blame. This is visible in extract 1, in which the suspect had just re-characterized the event as a running dispute before completing his account by categorizing the complainant as a 'nightmare neighbour' (line 50):

(from extract 1) [PN-59] (S is accused of criminal damage to a car)

50 S: → **An' from day one he's just been a nightmare neighbour.**

51 (1.0)

52 PO1: In what respect, I mean- (0.2) wh- wh- what goes on- I don- I

53 don't know what goes on [between-

54 S: → **[Loud music, (.) dis:cos, parties,**

55 **barbecues:,**

56 (0.2)

56 S: **threateni:ng,**

57 (2.1)

58 S: **callin' my wife (0.2) >well not my wife< my partner (.) a Pa:ki**

59 **bas:tard**

60 (1.3)

61 S: **his daughter picks on my daughter at schoo:l,**

62 (0.8)

63 PO1: °Hm°

64 (1.5)

65 S: **He:- that caravan outside's a running youth club,**

66 (1.5)

67 S : **As far as I know there's underage drinking and drugs go off in the**

68 **house, I don't know if he's a drug- drug dealer.**

69 PO1: .hh so how long ehm:

70 (0.2)

71 S: **He steal- he stole out of my garage.**

((S continues to list items that he alleges his neighbour stole from his garage))

By describing the complainant as ‘a nightmare neighbour’, the suspect casts his neighbour in a bad light, in effect damaging his moral character. The categorization refers to the type of behaviour the suspect has shown from the moment when him and the suspect started to live next to each other. The suspect does not say that the complainant ‘is a nightmare neighbour’, in a way that would refer to the person’s dispositional features. Instead, he designs his turn in such a way as to convey that the complainant’s negative and untoward conduct, associated with the category they are incumbent, is noticeable from a particular point in time, i.e., the moment when suspect and complainant became neighbours.

Even though the category ‘nightmare neighbour’ could already implicate the complainant, as it allows any competent member to picture the sorts of behaviour the suspect is referring to, the categorization work is further detailed in the suspect’s following turns (lines 54–71). In response to the police officer’s implicit request for elaboration, the suspect describes what the complainant had been doing that would characterize him as a ‘nightmare neighbour’—in order to account for the stigmatized or spoiled label he had just attributed to him, and that would differentiate him from a ‘good neighbour’. The description is unpacked in a way that it forms a list of actions whose seriousness is gradually increased. The initial items on the list, for example, can only be heard as damaging the complainant’s character if considered in combination with how the suspect has previously portrayed the complainant: ‘nightmare neighbour’. Organizing social events like discos, barbecues and parties is not a problem per se, but if these activities are done by someone whose has been described as a ‘nightmare neighbour’, they acquire a negative connotation tarnishing the complainant’s moral character. These initial items are then followed by other descriptions of the complainant’s actions, which convey more explicit versions of transgressions ([27], pp. 302–321), including lay descriptions of behaviour that could be typified as being criminal offences, such as ‘threatening and abusive behaviour’ (line 56), potentially racially aggravated (lines 58–59), ‘theft’, ‘supplying drugs’ (lines 67–68), ‘theft’ (line 71), etc.

The extract above is also a clear illustration of how counter-denunciations are achieved through a combination of practices. The categorization work in this case is embedded in an attempt to historicize the single incident and re-contextualize the suspect’s alleged criminal offence. The description ‘nightmare neighbour’ is a characterization of the complainant’s behaviour during what the suspect referred as a ‘running dispute’. The key point here is that whereas in a ‘running dispute’ there is no apparent party to blame, this is not the case of a dispute in which one of the parties is portrayed as ‘nightmare neighbour’. The rather neutral description, in which victimhood and blame are shared among the two parties, is then supplemented (note the use of ‘and’, connecting it to the previous suspect’s turn) with another one in which blame is directed towards the complainant. The categorization in turn allows the suspect to further historicize the single incident by listing a series of wrongdoings, presented as ongoing and recurrent, committed by the suspect against the suspect and his family.

Categorization as a means (resource) to discredit the complainant’s character is also a resource used by the following suspect, who had been arrested for criminal damage to his neighbour’s stereo sound system:

(4) [PN-05] (S is accused of criminal damage to a stereo sound system)

1 PO1: Okay Mr Simkims .hh uh when you were arre:sted (.) you actually
 2 said that you didn't do it. <Have you got anything else> (.) to
 3 as- add to that?

4 S: Yeah, for the benefit of the court () **Mister Lovatt is a (0.2)**
 5 **heroin and crack addict**
 6 (0.2)

7 S: **with an alcohol problem,**
 8 (0.3)

9 S: **and was trying to get money off me.**
 10 (0.4)

11 S: And that's all I have to
 12 say.
 13 (1.2)

14 PO1: Okay

Despite having denied committed any crime (lines 1–2), when asked by the interviewing police officer (PO1) if he had anything to add, the suspect makes a rather clear and forceful counter-denunciation, putting on record (“for the benefit of the court”, line 4) that the complainant, a neighbour who was accusing him of criminal damage, is himself a drug addict and alcoholic, and had attempted to rob him (lines 4–6). The suspect designs his turn by juxtaposing these characterological formulations [28] or dispositional categories (“heroin and crack addict”) with a description that conveys what the complainant was doing (“trying to get money off me”). In this sense, the dispositional categories’ work is twofold: they discredit the complainant’s character by attributing to him all the negative characteristics and behaviour commonly associated with heroin and crack addicts (spoiled identity), while implying a malicious motive to his attempt to get money off the suspect [8].

In both cases, suspects rely on categorial work to denounce the complainants, who are also their neighbours, and achieve a counter-denunciation. Furthermore, the categorization sets the ground for how police officers should make sense of the complainants’ conduct towards the respective suspect: someone who was trying to steal money to fulfill his dependence, and a person who has a long history of wrongful, and indeed criminal behaviour in the neighbourhood. In other words, the counter-denunciations in extracts (1) and (4) involve a selection of a particular category that promotes a particular version of events in which the complainant is in fact the offender; and this version is further elaborated by juxtaposing it with an action (or list of actions) that work to solidify the counter-denunciation (for more on categorization and blame, see [29–31]).

6 Conclusion

I have been concerned with the various ways through which suspects attempt to make putative victims/complainants at least partially responsible for the incidents for which they are investigated. Analysing audio-recorded police interviews with suspects in England, I have shown that these attempts—which I referred to as ‘counter-denunciations’ [5]—involve employing a series of discursive practices, including: (a) contrasting the complainant’s actions with their own innocent conduct; (b) historicizing the event being investigated; and (c) discrediting the complainant’s character—stigmatizing.

In the cases examined in this article, the first practice was accomplished primarily through a *contrastive device* that sets apart the ordinariness of the scene in which the suspect and their family are participants, and the extraordinariness of the action(s) that disrupts the order and transform the innocent and mundane scene into one that was problematic, troubled—i.e., transgressions, or potential criminal offences. The second practice involved selecting particular descriptions to characterise the complainant’s wrongful conduct as recurrent and ongoing, situating the incident in a *historicized context* and making it part of a larger picture. In those cases, from the perspective of the suspect at least, the incident is to be understood as the result of an ongoing larger neighbourhood dispute for which the complainant is also responsible. The third practice refers to the categorization work done by these suspects to describe the victim/complainant. This involves selecting categories that *discredit this other person* and promotes a particular version of events in which the complainant is in fact the offender. This version is further elaborated by juxtaposing it with an action (or series of actions) that serves to solidify the counter-denunciation. It is particularly worth noticing the fact that these practices may and indeed are used in combination, as it is the case of extract 1 shown in the introduction, and further analyzed throughout the remainder of the paper. In that case, the suspect set a contrast between his own innocent behaviour and the other’s wrongful and disproportionate conduct, situates that conduct in a historical context (as recurring and ongoing), before directly attacking the complainant’s moral character by referring to him as a ‘nightmare neighbour’.

These practices have in common the suspects’ reliance on the relational and contextual character of the categories ‘offender’ and ‘victim’. Rather than being treated as rigid and mutually exclusive, in a way that suggests that a participant involved in a potential crime would be either one or the other, the contrastive pair is seen as a flexible resource for displaying innocence and attributing blame and responsibility. In the cases shown above, suspects attempt to defend themselves not only by attacking the actions and character of the complainant, but also by portraying themselves as victims, through either describing the circumstances of that particular single incident (as in the first practice) or situating the incident as part of a larger neighbourhood conflict (as in the second practice).

Previous language and law research in police interviews and interrogations has discussed different the sequential and categorial resources suspects mobilize to deny [7] or justify [8] a potential criminal offence. My analysis contributes to

this literature by focusing on an underexplored defensive strategy, i.e., counter-denunciation, and scrutinizing the various discursive practices through which suspects accomplish them while being questioned by police officers. Although not designed to evaluate police officers and suspects' practices, I am aware that this paper gives practitioners access to a range of discursive techniques used by both parties in police-suspect interactions and allows them to reflect on their own practices.

One potential limitation of my work refers to the nature of the cases presented here. All police interviews in my data set were conducted in the context of neighbours' disputes, although the alleged crimes for which they are being investigated encompass a wide range of low-level criminal offences. Not surprisingly then, suspects (and sometimes police officers) display an orientation to their relationship with the victim/complainant when answering the officers' questions and producing their counter-denunciations. This orientation is more visible for example in the selection of categories to discredit the other's character ('nightmare neighbour') or in the attempts to historicize the single event, a practice that draws upon the fact that suspect and victim live in close proximity, which creates social and material possibility for previous and ongoing contact and interaction [32]. In this sense, future research might investigate whether and to what extent the same practices are employed in interviews involving cases in which suspects, and victims shared a different connection (family, work, etc.) or are not directly connected at all.

Acknowledgements In revising the paper for publication, I have benefitted from the insightful comments and suggestions made by Paul Drew and the anonymous reviewers. I would like to thank Frantisek Tuma, Jack Joyce and Sigurd D'hondt for comments on earlier drafts of this work. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards for making these data available to me, and to the police authority concerned for permission to use these material.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU). Funding was provided by Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Grant No. 0667-2014-5).

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