

# When Questioning Turns to Face Threat: An Interactional Sensitivity in 911 Call-Taking

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Asking questions and taking down information is one of the most important, yet problematic, parts of a 911 call-taker's job. Citizens often resist answering questions, and many call-takers express confusion over why this is the case. In this article, I argue that we can further understand interactional sensitivities in 911 calls by viewing questioning through the lens of facework. Training materials at Citywest 911 (a pseudonym) and much past research treat questions as simple information-gathering tools devoid of relational function. However, the case study presented in this paper—constructed from transcribed 911 calls, participant observation data, and interviews—illustrates how questions can be face-threatening. It closes with a discussion of how the analysis supports and parts ways with past research, as well as points to implications for the practice of emergency communications.

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## *Incident*

A woman calls 911 to report a drive-by shooting. She sounds panicked, hysterical. Call-taker Christy asks, "Did anyone get shot?" The caller says, "I don't care whether someone got shot." Christy yells, "We have to ask these questions!" The caller says "I've lived in this neighborhood for a long time and the police never come." Christy tries to ask several more questions, but the caller resists, saying, "Just don't come," before she hangs up. When Christy gets off the phone, her face is bright red, and she exclaims, "I couldn't help it, she wasn't answering my questions." She turns to me and says, "That kind of thing makes me mad. The only way to control her more was to yell more. I think they have a bad, don't like the police. There's no point in telling them *why* I need to ask for a description, because she'll just get more aggravated." Christy goes on to say that when call-takers ask callers for suspect description, callers sometimes say sarcastically, "Do you want me to go outside and get *shot* so I can check?" Call-taker Sue replies, "Why do they assume that? Why are they like that? I have often asked myself, 'am I not asking this question right?'" Christy says, "You *do* start to think you're asking the questions wrong" (fieldnotes).

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Asking questions and taking down information is one of the most important, yet problematic, parts of a 911 call-taker's job. To ascertain the priority level of a call and efficiently dispatch requested police, fire, or paramedic help in a timely manner, call-takers must gather specific location and description data from callers. Callers, however, often resist answering 911 call-takers' questions, and most call-takers do not seem to understand why this is the case. I contend that many of the problems in the 911 interrogation sequence stem from the face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967) associated with question-asking in the emergency communications context. As I illustrate with 911 call transcripts and other emergency communications field data, while call-takers view the interrogative series as *facilitating* the provision of appropriate assistance, callers may view it as *insulting* their own definition of an emergency, or as *impeding upon* their quest to receive police help.

Studying questioning at 911 offers a powerful context for analyzing theoretical notions about questioning and specifically investigating questioning in the institutional context. Questions and answers are central to emergency interactions, as callers and call-takers must do nearly all their talk-work by using these two speech acts. When the interrogation sequence does not go smoothly, however, participants can become rude or angry which, in turn, can lead to abbreviated interactions or premature hang-ups. Therefore, facilitating a successful, non-face-threatening interrogation sequence in the context of 911 is not only about preserving face, but also about preserving life. As past cases illustrate, when routine 911 interactions between caller and call-taker turn into arguments, the result can be fatal (Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988). Indeed, although the vast majority of 911 calls are handled efficiently and courteously, horror stories suggest that too many calls go awry (Witkin & Guttman, 1996). As a case in point, more than 20 calls were made to Philadelphia's 911 center about a violent teen fight in 1994. However, by the time police arrived forty-five minutes later, 16-year-old Eddie Polec lay dying, his head bashed in with a baseball bat. Citizens who called the police that night reported that "911 operators were curt and hostile" and said things like, "Don't talk to me like that" and "I asked you a question" (Lenzy, 1996, p. 36). Investigators have since determined that a variety of factors—including a shortage of patrol cars and too many requests for non-emergencies—played a role in the Polec incident (Lenzy, 1996). However, better understanding the communication particulars of 911 call interactions can certainly shed light on one reason 911 calls go awry.

In this report, I specifically focus on the face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955, 1967) associated with call-taker questions in the emergency communications context. Because communication has both a content and relational function (Watzlawick, Beavin, &

Jackson, 1967), questions cannot merely be thought of as instrumental tools for acquiring information. In addition to their simple information-gathering function, questions also serve as a vehicle for the interaction work of creating one's own identity and threatening or supporting that of another. However, training materials at Citywest 911 (a pseudonym) seem to treat questions as simple information-gathering tools. That they do so is not surprising; social science research has largely examined questions as transparent conversational devices devoid of relational significance. The face threat associated with questions is an under-analyzed sensitivity in 911 call-taking; by further understanding it, we may better understand problems with 911 interactions. Furthermore, whereas attention to face is considered to be a universal practice in language (Brown & Levinson, 1987), what constitutes face threat is contextually and culturally dependent. In other words, what is considered polite in one context may be considered impolite or face-threatening in another. Using naturalistic ongoing discourse to study questioning and face threat provides an illustration of the complexities and contextual nature of politeness and facework (Craig Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Penman, 1990).

The report unfolds as follows. First, I review relevant literature on questioning and facework. Then, after discussing the research site and interpretive data analysis methods, I detail Citywest's institutional stance toward questioning and the ways in which call-takers make sense of problems with the interrogation sequence. Relying on transcripts of 911 calls coupled with participant observation and interview data, the heart of the analysis illustrates different ways in which call-takers' questions can threaten callers' face. I conclude with the case's implications for theories of questioning and facework and applications for the practice of emergency communications.

## Facework, Questioning and 911

### *Facework*

Issues of "face" are generally associated with the desire of people to be seen in a positive manner, have a desirable public self-image, and not be embarrassed or humiliated (Goffman, 1955, 1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) expanded on Goffman's concept of face to delineate negative from positive face needs. Negative face refers to a person's desire to be free from imposition, whereas positive face refers to a person's desire to be appreciated and approved of. Lim and Bowers (1991) note that there are two types of positive facework: the desire to be included (*fellowship face*) and the desire to be respected (*competence face*).

People usually engage in (and expect others to engage in) communicative work to maintain both their own and another's face. As Brown and Levinson (1987) note, "everyone's face depends on everyone else's

being maintained, and since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own to threaten others' faces, it is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each others' face" (p. 61). As such, doing work to uphold face appears to be a pervasive and rational practice of social life—something that is a mundane part of interaction and leaves an imprint on language. Attention to face is evidenced through a number of linguistic cues. For instance, acts of deference symbolically convey regard for another, either through avoidance (giving a person space) or through presentation (being complimentary to another) (Goffman, 1967). Politeness strategies linguistically soften a face-threatening act through, for instance, the use of hedges, address forms, and apologies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), three factors—power, distance, and rank threat—determine the "weightiness" of face threat and, thus, help determine "the level of politeness with which a face-threatening act will be communicated" (p. 76). From this point of view, individuals will likely show more politeness with a boss than with a subordinate (power), with a stranger than with a sibling (distance), and when they are asking to borrow one hundred dollars versus one dollar (rank threat of act). Brown and Levinson, as well as Lim and Bowers, conceive of negative politeness as distinct from and globally "more polite" than positive politeness. However, the two strategies are often intertwined in practice (Penman, 1990; K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998), in that the same utterance can indicate aspects of both positive and negative politeness.

Facework is in the background of all interaction; however, when face is threatened or lost, it suddenly becomes salient and visible. One way face can be threatened is through question-asking. Requests can impose on the respondent's negative face by indicating that the questioner wants the respondent to do or refrain from doing something and can threaten positive face when they imply criticism or insult (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Furthermore, problems can occur with questioning when the speaker and listener vary in their estimation as to the urgency of the situation. As Brown and Levinson (1987) explain, when individuals consider a decision to threaten another's face, they must balance their desire to be efficient or urgent with their desire to uphold the other's face; unless the former is greater than the latter, the speaker will minimize the face-threatening act (p. 68). In highly emotional and urgent situations, such as those to be expected in the 911 context, one might, therefore, presume that attention to face is minimal. It would be interesting to know how (if?) face needs are implicated in the 911 context.

### *Questioning*

In addition to the concepts of facework and politeness, scholarly literature concerning questioning framed the current analysis. Past

research has examined typologies of questions (Allwinn, 1991; Goody, 1978; Kearsley, 1976), questioning in institutional contexts (Bergmann, 1992; Penman, 1987, 1990; Tracy & Naughton, 1994; Woodbury, 1984), questioning in employment interviews (Jablin & Miller, 1990; Tengler & Jablin, 1983), questioning and relational definition and dominance (Rogers-Millar & Millar, 1979; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), questioning and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), questioning and conversational management (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982), questioning and uncertainty reduction in initial interactions (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and question type and validity of response (Bradburn, Sudman, Blair, & Stocking, 1978; Petty, Rennier, & Cacioppo, 1987; Smith, 1987). Krone (1993) provides a review of questioning and communication.

Several aspects of this literature situated the current study. First, questions have been equated with their "level" of politeness. When a questioner believes addressees are low in willingness, Allwinn (1991) contends that he or she needs to do more work in finding the "right formulation" of the question. A question can be formulated to be more polite in several ways (Allwinn, 1991), such as by making it indirect (e.g., "I'm not sure how much collateral I need to have") or by adding *pre-remarks* ("I need to ask about collateral because . . ."). Direct questions (e.g., "How much collateral do I need to have?") are considered to be impolite, especially when they are in the *imperative* form (e.g., "Tell me how much collateral I need to have"). Nevertheless, direct questions are expected and usually accepted as valid under conditions of high willingness of the addressee and high legitimacy of the questioner (Allwinn, 1991). From one point of view, this seems to suggest that in emergency, high-tension interactions, such as those involved in 911 calls, questioners need not pay much attention to face needs of their addressee. However, some citizens may not view 911 call-takers as being in this high legitimacy position (Tracy, 1997; Whalen et al., 1988)—an issue that encourages further examination of the face threat involved in call-taker questions.

Past research also suggests that closed-answer questions (which provide a choice of answers, e.g., "Is his shirt dark or light in color?") can be more face-threatening than open-ended ones because they *limit* and, thus, constrain the ways the person being questioned can respond (Penman, 1990). Closed-answer questions also convey the impression that the questioner already knows more than the person answering. However, Allwinn (1991) suggests that closed-ended questions, by providing a limited range of potential answers, are more informative than open-ended questions and, thus, can elicit a response that is more appropriate than an open-ended response. Examining questions in the 911 sequence could provide additional information concerning the pros and cons of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Furthermore, it provides us information about this issue in the context of ongoing

discourse. As Allwinn (1991) notes, examining "complex questioning utterances instead of "one shot questions" (p. 182) provides a better understanding of the social implications of questions.

Another concept that framed the current study is the distinction between *epistemic* and *expressive* questions (Kearsley, 1976). Epistemic questions serve the purpose of eliciting information (the "wh-" questions—who, what, where, when and how), as well as establishing the addressee's knowledge of the answer (e.g., "Tell me again, how do you know that the woman next door has a gun?"). Expressive questions, on the other hand, convey attitudinal information to the addressee (e.g., "Why do you think this is an emergency?") and may convey doubt in the addressee's assessment of a situation. By examining these issues in the 911 context, we can further discern how questions designed to be epistemic can also be expressive and, thus, serve to support or threaten another's face.

Several communication studies have examined how questions, in context, serve to uphold or threaten another's identity and face. We know about issues of facework and questioning in journalistic interviews (Clayman, 1992; Clayman & Whalen, 1989), questioning between doctors and their patients (Bergmann, 1992), questions in intellectual discourse (Tracy & Naughton, 1994), and questioning in the courtroom (Penman, 1987, 1990; Woodbury, 1984). For instance, attorneys' questions implicate a witness as believable and reasonable or as deceptive and underhanded (Penman, 1987, 1990). Simply the grammatical form of a lawyer's question can project a person in a positive or negative light (Woodbury, 1984); by forming a question in the negative (e.g., "You didn't call the police right away?"), a questioner can depict the respondent as deceitful and out of the ordinary. Indeed, Tracy and Naughton (1994) found in their analysis of academic discussion that questioning does more than simply elicit information; it also facilitates identity work by casting some people as reasonable, competent, and honest and others as deceptive, incompetent, or untrustworthy.

### *Emergency Communications*

Several past analyses provide background information on the emergency communications scene and interactions between citizens and representatives of the police. Reiss (1971) has observed that one of the main problems in citizen-police interaction is that police expect deference, whereas citizens want personal involvement. Manning (1988) determined how problems could occur because the information that traveled via computer from 911 call-takers to police dispatchers to police officers was not simply transferred, but transformed, along the way.

More directly related to the interactional problems encountered during 911 calls, a group of conversation analysts have examined the social structure created through talk and offered structural explanations of several interactional problems (Sharrock & Turner, 1978; Whalen, Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman, 1984, 1992a, 1992b). Whalen et al. (1988), for instance, analyzed a single emergency call that went seriously awry. In this call, a man demanded that the call-taker immediately send an ambulance for his dying mother. Throughout the call, the man resisted answering the call-taker's questions; as a result, police help was delayed, and his mother died. Whalen et al. (1988) concluded that through the moment-by-moment talk of the call, the questioning sequence was metamorphosed into an argument, which caused the interrogation to fail. These studies provide helpful information regarding the moment-by-moment talk of emergency interactions. However, because they focus primarily on tape-recorded calls to the police, they reveal little about the training received by call-takers or the behind-the-scenes motivations by 911 employees to account for why and how calls go awry. The current report represents an attempt to get at these understandings through the use of participant observation, interviews and organizational document data, in addition to examining transcripts of tape-recorded calls.

The current report is one of several drawn from the same data set (Tracy, 1997; K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998; S. Tracy & Tracy, 1998; Tracy & Anderson, 1999). It builds on, yet parts with, two of these studies in particular. First, K. Tracy and Tracy (1998) analyzed two calls at 911 during which call-takers engaged in marked "face attack," that is "communicative actions that deliberately seek to insult" (K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998, p. 229). The discourse analysis of these rare types of calls focused on how call-taker rudeness can be expressed through vocal delivery, strings of assertions/counter-assertions, and stance indicators. Whereas "face attack" is a deliberate communicative action designed to be threatening, the current report examines the *subtle* and *routine* ways call-takers' questions can be face-threatening even when they are intended to simply gather requisite information to send police help.

A second study, Tracy (1997), examined how callers oftentimes approach the 911 interaction with a "customer service" frame, one that treats 911 as a type of service given on demand (similar to a pizza delivery service). This frame clashes with call-takers who hold a "public service" frame, one that treats 911 service as something that must be justified. Tracy (1997) concluded that one result of this "interactional asynchrony" is that callers and call-takers have differing expectations as to the amount of information needed in 911 calls. Understanding these differing frames helps explain why 911 interactions go awry. Nevertheless, call-takers have little control over public expectations for 911 service. The current report analyzes question-asking, a com-

munication skill that can be learned and improved upon (Goody, 1978). Understanding how face implications play a role in the interactional (a)synchrony of the 911 interrogation sequence can assist emergency communications employees in reflecting upon and improving their everyday questioning practices.

### Background, Data and Interpretive Method

The "Citywest Emergency Communications Center" is located in a Western American city with a city population of half a million and a metropolitan population of two million. The center coordinates dispatch of police, fire, and paramedic services for the city. During an eight-to-ten hour shift, call-takers either answered 911 calls or the city's non-emergency calls, but the focus in this report is on 911 emergency interactions and call-takers who were answering the 911 line. Because of Citywest's size, there were multiple 911 call-takers (up to 16) and police dispatchers (six—one for each police district) who worked at any one time. In 1995, Citywest Center handled an average of 3,087 calls per day; 52 percent of the calls were made to 911, and the other 48 percent came into the non-emergency police number. Over the entire 1995 year, the Citywest Center received in excess of 1,125,000 calls.

Civilian call-takers serve as the initial contact person for citizens calling the police. After recording incident information, the call-taker then transfers information to police, fire, or paramedic dispatchers who are located in the same building. Call-takers are expected to obtain and enter into the computer as much incident information as possible. Then, with the help of Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) and Automatic Number and Location Indicator (ANI and ALI), call-takers transfer the incident via computer to dispatchers.

### *Data Sources*

This study made use of data from four different sources collected over a period of ten months. A primary source of data was fieldnotes from approximately 100 hours of participant observation with 20 different call-takers. I conducted the majority of my observations with call-takers who worked the 4 p.m.-2 a.m. shift (known as the "busiest" and "most exciting" shift) and focused my participant-observation largely on issues that call-takers found to be dilemmatic or challenging. My participation entailed sitting with the call-takers with my own headset listening to calls and engaging in conversation and "ethnographic interviews" with call-takers, supervisors, and police, fire, and paramedic dispatchers between calls (Lindlof, 1995). I utilized participant observation methods recommended by Spradley (1980) and Lindlof (1995) and typed my fieldnotes generally within 36 hours after each observation. Fieldnotes yielded nearly 200 pages of single-spaced type-written text.



A second primary source of data was seven semi-structured, recorded interviews with call-takers. I designed interview questions to elicit answers that allowed for elaboration of challenges evidenced in call-takers' day-to-day practices and noted in my fieldnotes. Among other topics, the interviews focused on techniques call-takers used with callers who resisted answering questions, how they understood the reasons why callers did not answer questions, and how they were formally trained to ask questions. Interviews were transcribed resulting in a little more than 70 pages of single-spaced type-written text.

Third, I drew on data from several of Citywest's institutional documents, including a Citywest training manual, an Apco Institute training manual on telecommunications (as used by Citywest), year-end statistical summaries of Citywest as released to the public, and several internal memos. These sources provided information on Citywest's formal institutional stance toward questioning and other organizational matters.

Last, I examined call transcripts from a database of 650 audio-taped Citywest calls that a research partner and I downloaded from institutional reel-to-reel tapes to audio cassettes. Calls in the database came from all 24 hours of the day, from weekdays and weekends, and from approximately 20 different 911 operators. We logged a brief description of each call and transcribed 55 calls from the data set using a simplified version of the Jeffersonian transcription system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The transcribed calls provided conversational particulars concerning questioning in the 911 context.

### *Interpretive Analysis Procedures*

I relied on fieldnotes and interview data, not as a reflection of reality, but as means to understanding problems in the 911 call-taking scene (Denzin, 1997). My overall research purpose in entering the emergency communications field was to improve our understanding of problems and difficulties associated with the 911 call-taking encounter. Indeed, the single event that initially prompted my entering the 911 context was the incident of 16-year-old Eddie Polec, who was beaten to death with a bat (Witkin & Guttman, 1996). In light of concerns about this incident and questions about the general viability of America's 911 system, I focused my analysis of data on matters that caused problems and or disruptions in the 911 sequence. I analyzed data using a version of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method, an iterative, circular method characterized by multiple readings of data, identification of emergent themes and evaluation (and reevaluation) of data (see Charmaz, 2000; Lindlof, 1995 for reviews of this method). In initial readings, I examined data for organizational issues that call-takers found to be problematic. One of the areas that emerged was interactional problems related to questions

during the interrogation sequence. I re-examined the data, analyzing the different ways and angles as to how and why questioning was problematic. I also examined organizational training manuals for institutionally-prescribed information on questioning. From these focused readings, several areas emerged as pertinent to the current analysis, including exemplars of problematic questioning calls, training and personal strategies for dealing with problematic callers, call-takers' estimations that callers do not know what to do during a 911 call, and call-takers' explanations as to why callers do not like to answer questions. Then, using conceptual categories of positive and negative face developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Lim and Bowers (1991), as well as the types of face that can be threatened in question-asking (Brown and Levinson, 1987), I analyzed exemplars of different ways in which 911 call-taker questions may be face-threatening. My goals in doing the analyses included explicating how and why questioning can become problematic because of its connection to face threat and/or lack of politeness in the 911 arena. This is in contrast, for instance, to attempting to describe or calculate the percentage of time in which 911 calls involved face threat. Brown and Levinson (1987) note the "intrinsic difficulties of trying to obtain quantitative measures of politeness strategies in naturalistic interactional data" (p. 22).

After engaging in the grounded analysis of fieldnote and interview data, I scanned the database of 650 calls for those that illustrated interactional problems in the questioning sequence. I made these choices by considering three criteria: 1) call-takers' expressed dilemmas with questions (which emerged in field data), 2) the theoretical constructs of positive and negative face issues, and 3) estimations of what it means for a caller to express frustration or anger in an interactional sequence, revealed by a raised voice, interruptions, controlled enunciation, and cursing (K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998). I analyzed transcripts of calls using a version of action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995), an approach that integrates information from field data to inform the particulars of talk. Action-implicative discourse analysis differs from quantitative studies of interaction that collapse and report discourse in terms of descriptive categories. As Tracy, (1995) explains, "Action-implicative discourse analysis is not primarily making claims about what actually happened—what speakers in particular instances intended and what recipients inferred. Instead, it seeks to describe meanings of conversational actions that are plausible given the situational type of interest" (pp. 202–203). In using action-implicative discourse analysis, along with theoretical notions of different types of face threat, my aim was to reconstruct and make sense of the different ways questions could be face-threatening and to identify conversational techniques that might address these problems.

### The Case Analysis

Citizens call 911 for myriad reasons which range from "true" emergencies, such as robberies-in-progress, domestic violence incidents, and break-ins, to more mundane incidents, such as noise complaints, lockouts, and traffic accident reports, as well as for what may be considered to be inappropriate calls, such as asking for the time of day, calling just to chat, or swearing over the phone and then hanging up. One component that all calls have in common, however, is the existence of a questioning sequence—an interaction flow that can serve to be face-threatening to callers. The following analysis examines the institutional messages and structures that distinguish questioning practice. I first offer data to illustrate call-takers' expressed problems with the call-taking sequence, an issue that sets the stage for understanding how face threat is associated with call-takers' questioning frustrations. I then examine the specific ways 911 questions can threaten callers' desires to be seen as trustworthy, intelligent, and of good character and to be unimpeded in their quest to receive police service.

#### *Institutional Stance Toward Questioning*

Information gathering is a central part of the 911 call-taker/caller interaction. Call-taker Steve Hernandez summed up the process in saying, "Our job is not to become emotionally involved. Instead, our job is to find out 'where' they're calling from, 'who' is calling and 'who' is beating them." Indeed, according to the Citywest training manual, call-takers should ask a series of "wh-" questions, beginning with where the incident is occurring, followed by what happened, when it occurred, a detailed description of who was involved, and how it came to pass (e.g., with a weapon, with the use of a vehicle, etc.). This order is strategic; in about 90 percent of the calls, police are dispatched to the location of the incident, which makes the question, "What is going on?" less relevant than the question, "Where is this happening?" In addition, by asking the "where" question first, police can still be dispatched if the call is suddenly disconnected. The 911 training manual does not address the order or pertinence of these questions nor do much to warn call-takers that citizens may not answer their questions. The primary piece of advice for call-taker is to engage in "persistent repetition" when dealing with "hysterical" callers. The Apco Training manual for Citywest call-takers characterizes this technique as follows:

Persistent repetition merely requires that you repeat the described request each time in the same identical way. Do not vary the sentence structure. Variation in the content or structure of the statement will lessen its impact on the hysterical caller and generally results in its being ineffective . . . Take control . . . Be generic.

Per these instructions, call-takers are not advised to rephrase questions even if they are ineffective in garnering answers in their current

form. Rather, call-takers are to repeat the question as often as necessary in a calm voice until the caller answers. For specific types of calls, such as robberies in progress and parking complaints, call-takers are taught to acquire specific types of information. But for many incidents, call-takers must just use their own judgment. The introduction of the training manual states:

These procedures are not intended to cover every situation which may arise in the course of one's career. There will be times when employees will have to rely solely upon their experience in order to be effective. The employee's value to the citizens of (name of city) will be gauged not only by compliance with the instructions contained in this manual, but also by demonstrations of good judgment, zeal and performance under widely variant conditions.

The questioning work of many 911 call-takers did, in fact, take into account these institutionally-prescribed training mandates. However, another institutional structure—the separation of duties between call-taking and police-dispatching—played an even stronger role in distinguishing the day-to-day practice of 911 call-taker questioning practices. At Citywest 911, call-takers talk to citizens and record case reports in a computer. These reports are then transferred electronically to police dispatchers who sit in another section of the communications facility. Dispatchers, most of whom have been call-takers in the past, are required to have more training than call-takers and are hierarchically superior to call-takers. For reasons of efficiency, this separation in duties is common in many large metropolitan 911 centers. However, the upshot of this organizational structure is that call-takers never possess a larger picture of the informational demands of the police officer deployed to the scene. Because of this, dispatchers expect call-takers to obtain and enter into the computer as much information about the incident as possible, even if the information does not seem absolutely relevant or necessary to the call-taker. If a call-taker does not record enough (or the “right”) information, dispatchers can reprimand call-takers or make them re-contact the caller to acquire more information before police are sent to the scene. Several comments by call-takers illustrate the institutional demands of taking down enough information.

I'd rather get too much information than not enough. I mean, if the dispatchers have to read an extra line or two, I'd rather that than them calling me back saying, “Well, why didn't you get a physical [description], or why didn't you do this or why didn't you get that?” I'd rather supply them with too much than not enough. (Tiffany interview)

Callers only think about themselves. They don't understand that we have to get information about weapons and other stuff. Because if we don't code it as a gun, the dispatchers will come back and whip us a new one. (Erika interview)

As illustrated in these comments, call-takers are quite aware of their institutionally inferior role compared to that of dispatchers. They also

understand that one way to avoid organizational sanctions is by obtaining more than enough information in their initial interactions with callers. Thus, this organizational structure at Citywest center plays a significant (though perhaps inadvertent) role in the 911 questioning sequence by encouraging call-takers to ask more (and more detailed) questions of callers than what might be necessary—an issue that in itself, can be face-threatening to callers, in that it intrudes upon their desire to receive immediate police service.

Another organizational issue that affects the questioning practice of 911 call-takers is the tension of obtaining and recording all the information in a courteous manner, yet doing so in a short amount of time. Indeed, this dilemma is represented in what the Citywest training manual indicates are the two major complaints reported to the communications bureau—discourtesy and delayed response. The training manual reads: “In an emergency, TIME is a very important factor so the agent must get the information to the dispatcher as soon as possible.” To do this, call-takers are instructed to “not listen long to opinions or information that isn’t needed.” Nevertheless, call-takers are simultaneously instructed to “obtain all pertinent information” and not “belittle callers for not having a proper understanding of what, in our mind, constitutes an emergency.” These instructions imply that management knows that “belittling” occurs, yet the training manual does little to suggest how it works or what it looks like. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that call-takers find it difficult to balance the information-time tension. As call-taker Felicia said,

I have to tell callers, “Well, I have to do my job and these are the questions that I have to ask, and the longer I have to explain it to you the longer it takes to finish this call,” and they will give it [the answer] to me, grudgingly, but eventually they give it to me. If people would just cooperate it would go a lot easier on us and on them. [Callers should] answer the questions.

Call-taker Christy also cited frustrations that relate to the information-time tension. She said:

I guess I just wish that people would realize that we are on their side and we are trying to get them some help. When we ask them questions, it is not [that] we are trying to delay an officer getting there. We are asking the questions because we really need to know.

Most call-takers had theories as to why callers had trouble answering their questions. For instance, some thought it was because callers may have experienced negative interactions with the police in the past. Call-taker Erika said, “Callers don’t want to answer questions. But then again, maybe that’s because they’ve been victimized by the system in the past.” Others call-takers thought caller “hysteria” was to blame. Tiffany said:

[When people don’t answer questions], they’re usually in high-stress situations—a lot of time shootings, domestic violence in progress with

weapons and things like that. They just want the police there, they don't want to talk to you, they don't want to give you the information, they just want them there now . . . . You know, all we want is the information, all they want is the police.

Call-takers also commented that callers refused to answer questions because they "do not want to get involved." As call-taker Shotci said, "A lot of people want to remain anonymous."

Last, a handful of call-takers also pointed out that callers and call-takers have different needs during the 911 interactional sequence. Consider the following interview excerpt from call-taker Christy who, of all the call-takers I interviewed, seemed to have the most sophisticated explanation for callers not responding to call-taker questions:

To them, if you are calling 911 and somebody just shot somebody else—all you want is an officer. You don't want to be on the phone talking to anybody trying to get information and it is because they are in a hysterical frame of mind they are not in a calm state . . . . To them it is irrelevant that we are asking them who has the gun and what is that person wearing and what direction they are going. I don't think a lot of people really connect as to why we are asking them that so they get upset with us. The other part of the reason [they get upset is] they don't think that the officer is coming over. They think while we are asking these questions we are wasting time. Their main concern is getting somebody right now.

As evidenced through the above interview excerpt, call-taker Christy seems to understand that callers do not "connect as to why" call-takers ask these questions. However, the theories expressed by Christy and the other call-takers largely implicate callers' "hysteria" or desire not to be involved, or structural situations, such as information-time dilemma, as being the primary culprits for disrupting the emergency communication interrogation sequence. Unfortunately, there is very little that call-takers themselves can do to improve upon these situations, and this seeming lack of control likely played a part in call-takers' frustration over problems with questioning. Indeed, none of the call-takers I observed or interviewed expressed explicitly ideas about how he or she personally could affect or improve upon the questioning practices during 911 calls. Furthermore, only once did I see any evidence of self-interrogation; during an especially problematic "questioning" call (recounted in the opening of this article), call-taker Sue wondered aloud why callers became angry with call-takers' questions in exclaiming, "Why are they [callers] like that? I have often asked myself, 'am I not asking this question right?'" As argued below, seemingly innocent questions can be face threatening within the 911 context.

From examining Citywest field data in conjunction with theoretical notions of positive and negative face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lim & Bowers, 1991), several face needs emerged as salient in the 911 questioning sequence. In regard to positive face, callers desire to be

seen as believable and trustworthy. They also have the need for *fel-lowship* from the call-taker, in that they obviously want the call-taker to make the caller's priority their own (or the institution's) priority and treat them as likable. In addition, callers, like all people, have the *competence* face need of being seen as knowledgeable, intelligent, and moral. If they feel as though someone is treating them as ignorant, stupid, or sleazy, this will naturally constitute a threat to their positive face. In regard to negative face, callers generally do not want to be impeded in their endeavor to receive police help. Intrinsic to this is the desire of callers to be treated as reasonable in their definition of an emergency, as well in their estimation of what information is necessary for them to provide in order to constitute the need for emergency help. Another central negative face requirement is that call-takers respect the caller's need for timely service. For the sake of conceptual clarity, the following analysis is organized by the type of face need that is being threatened, a determination made through the use of action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995). Nevertheless, callers' face needs are intertwined and overlapping (Penman, 1990), and one question can threaten a caller's face in numerous ways.

### *Threats to Trustworthiness*

When citizens call the police, they want (and logistically need) to be considered trustworthy, so that they can effectively ascertain emergency service. Questions from call-takers, however, sometimes serve to imply disbelief in the caller's story. Consider the following excerpt between a male caller and female call-taker. The caller, who wants the police to help him get custody of his children, indicated earlier in the call that he has a court order proving that it's "his weekend" to have custody. After ascertaining this information, the call-taker launched into the following interrogation sequence (CT = call-taker, C = caller).

1. CT O.K., umm, where are you at?
2. C I'm at 4819 Suarez.
3. CT Is that *her residence*?
4. C Yeah, that's, she's staying with her mom, yes, (.) and uh, y'know =
5. CT = Are you using a cell phone?
6. C Yes.
7. CT O.K., what's your name?
8. C Uhh, m-, my name?
9. CT Uh huh.
10. C Jim Dennis.
11. CT (typing sound, 2 sec) And Jim, what's the cell phone number?
12. C Uhh, eight seven four, two nine oh eight.
13. CT Are you like out in front of that location?
14. C Yes I am.
15. CT O.K., what kind of car are you in?
16. C I'm in uhh, in a Nova.
17. CT What color (flat)
18. C Uhh, green? Uhh, [four door.
19. CT [what year? What year?

20. C Uhh, jees (chuckling), I'm not sure . . . [Sixty  
 21. CT [Is it older?  
 22. C Yeah, it's an older, an older car.  
 23. CT And what are you wearing.  
 24. C (pause — 3 seconds)  
 25. CT Sir?  
 26. C I'm *wearing a shirt*, with uh =  
 27. CT = Like *what color* shirt?  
 28. C (Chuckle) *why, why are you asking?*  
 29. CT BECAUSE IF I'M SENDING OFFICERS OUT THEY NEED TO BE ABLE  
 30. TO IDENTIFY THAT IT'S *YOU*. YOU WANT THEM TO COME OUT AND  
 31. ASSIST YOU.  
 32. C O.K.  
 33. CT You *need* to say, they're goin' to see [you  
 34. C [ohh  
 35. CT There could be a *million* cars in that area.

In this incident, the caller provides descriptive information in a quite agreeable fashion (lines 1–19). However, his chuckling (lines 20 and 28) indicates that he may be becoming uncomfortable with the call-taker's questions. In response to the question about what he is wearing (line 23), the man pauses for three seconds (line 24). In light of the man's earlier quick responses to questions, it is unlikely that the pause indicates a thoughtful reflection of his answer. It seems more likely that he is confused by the need for the query itself. Indeed, it is easy to understand why a person may become defensive and confused when confronted with a long list of questions. We can imagine everyday situations in which a lot of questions signals disbelief in another's story. For instance, we might imagine a situation in which a mother comes home to a babysitter and sleeping children to find that all the food in the refrigerator has disappeared. Perhaps the babysitter explains that the children were very hungry, but the mother continues to grill the babysitter with specific questions (e.g., When did they eat it? When did *you* last eat? How did you get the two-year-old to eat artichoke dip?). This type of questioning likely goes beyond friendly interest; a list of questions free of any explanation often implies a lack of trust.

This situation is magnified in the 911 context for several reasons. First, call-takers rarely provide an explanation of their questions. Second, they attempt to get off the phone as quickly as possible, and third, past research indicates that they approach the 911 call-taking interaction with a "public service" mental frame that leads them to believe that callers should automatically accept and answer their questions (Tracy, 1997). In contrast, many citizens view 911 service as something that should rightly be given upon demand, rather than something that must be justified. Granted, given the information-time tension, call-takers may have good reasons for not providing explanations for questions. However, most citizens are unfamiliar and unpracticed in 911 interactions, creating a situation in which routine 911



interrogation sequences can pose a threat to citizens' desire of being treated as trustworthy.

In the above excerpted call, the call-taker's questions, and the citizen's reaction to them, did not result in an extended argument. As field data illustrate, however, questions can provoke callers to anger. In the following example, questions trigger an inflamed reaction from a caller who is already upset:

Call-taker Felicia picks up a call from a man who sounds very agitated. He immediately says, "Send a car to 007 South Park." Felicia asks, "What's going on there?" He explains that his brother is trying to beat him up. He says, "Please hurry, please come." She asks, "What is his name?" He responds, "Please come, can't you hear him in the background?" She repeats, "What is his name?" He provides it. Then Felicia asks, "What is he wearing?" At this point the caller is grumbling and swearing. Felicia says, "Sir, we need to know what he's wearing so police can identify him." He gives description. Then Felicia asks if he's inside or outside. He doesn't answer, but rather screams, "Can't you hear him in the background—would you please hurry up!" (fieldnotes).

In this excerpt, Felicia asks for the caller's name and what he is wearing. On their face, these are epistemic questions (Kearsley, 1976)—questions that serve the simple purpose of acquiring information. Nevertheless, we can see in the caller's repeated response to the call-taker's questions with variations of, "Can't you hear him in the background," that the caller seems to understand the call-taker's questions as expressing doubt in or disbelief of the caller's story. In responding this way, the caller also denies the reasonableness of the call-taker asking the question, in essence saying, "He's loud and violent, what difference does it make what his name is? You can hear him, so send someone already!" This incident illustrates how epistemic questions can simultaneously be understood to be expressive of an attitude, such as "I don't trust you," even if expressing this attitude is not the intention of the questioner.

### *Threats to Intelligence*

When we consider questioning practices in everyday contexts, it is easy to imagine situations in which asking questions can make the respondent feel as if (s)he is not very bright. For instance, the question, "What were you thinking?" can serve to imply that the listener was not thinking, even if the questioner was sincerely curious about the thought pattern of the other. Likewise, in the 911 context, questions designed by call-takers to be epistemic can threaten callers' desire of being treated as intelligent or knowledgeable. For instance, meta-communicative questions, such as, "Do you hear me?" or "Can you hear what I'm saying?" that in other contexts might show concern for the other, can seemingly portray another as significantly deficient in sense-making abilities.

Most simply, questions can threaten intelligence when they serve to inform the other that their communicative behavior is somehow unreasonable or inappropriate, something that is illustrated in the following call excerpt.

- C Yes ma'am, uhh, who can I speak with there regarding, uh, a location on my mother and dad?  
 CT What do you mean, a location on your mom and dad?

The call-taker's response, "What do you mean?," essentially tells the caller that his request does not make any sense in this context. Likewise, call-takers would often ask callers variations of the following question: "Which way did [the suspect/the vehicle] go?" Throughout my fieldwork, I came to understand that call-takers desired a response that indicated geographic direction such as, "He ran north down State Street." However, callers often responded to this question with institutionally "inappropriate" answers. In one instance, a caller responded by saying, "He ran left." In another, the caller said, "Down Grant Street." In both cases, the call-takers immediately responded with variations of, "No, east, west, north or south?" In this type of repair question, call-takers do the work of telling callers that their first answers are inappropriate. Considering the time and potential face threat associated with repair questions, it might be more appropriate for call-takers to offer a more informative closed-ended question to begin with. Doing so could save time in most cases and would also reduce the possibility of implying that the caller is intellectually deficient for not knowing the proper way to answer. Thus, providing a closed-ended question could decrease the possibility of further interactional disruptions.

Questions that ask callers why they did or did not do something also do the work of threatening the other's desire to be treated as intelligent. For instance, in the following incident, a man is calling in for a second time to find out why the police still have not been dispatched to his location. The call-taker's questions imply that the caller has done something stupid and wrong:

1. CT Are you calling from the same place?
2. C No sir, like down the street.
3. CT Where'd you call from the first time?
4. C Sweet Pappas
5. CT Kay, why didn't you stay there?
6. C What's that?
7. CT Why didn't you stay (.) there?
8. C Huh (.) I was *there* for an hour and an half.

The call-takers' first two questions can be considered to be epistemic; the call-taker is trying to determine the present location of the caller. However, the third question, "Kay, why didn't you stay there?," clearly indicates an attitude. Lawyers, for instance, can portray adversary witnesses as deviating from normal action when they ask ques-

tions that are in the negative form, such as, "Why did you not call the police?" (Woodbury, 1984). Likewise, in the above instance, by formulating the question in the negative ("Why didn't you stay there?"), the 911 call-taker espouses a preferred mode of action and implies that the caller broke the norm. The threat of this question also is illustrated in the caller's surprised response, "What's that?," (line 6) and hesitation through his "Huh (.)" (line 8). In addition, the caller does not directly explain why he failed to stay at the location. Rather, he provides an account of why it is not reasonable for the call-taker to expect him to stay at the original location (line 8). Accounts are typically used when people are trying to seem reasonable and save face (McLaughlin & Cody, 1992). The caller's attempt to save face thus points to the way the call-taker's questions were face-threatening in nature.

Questions about one's marital status (or boyfriend/girlfriend status) that may seem unthreatening in many contexts can imply stupidity in the realm of 911. In the following incident, the citizen reports that her car has been "taken" by a "friend" who was staying at her house while she was in the hospital. In this interaction, the call-taker is trying to learn more about the caller's "friend":

1. CT Okay a *friend* of yours, meaning an acquaintance friend, or a friend,
2. [A boyfriend?]
3. C [He was staying with]
4. CT Pardon?
5. CT A boyfriend?
6. C Ye:ah
7. CT Okay. So it's a boyfriend and he stayed with you for *how long*?
8. C Pardon?
9. CT How long has he *stayed* with you?
10. C About a month
11. CT Okay, so you're (.) *together* as a boyfriend then.
12. C Yeah.
13. CT Okay well he has access to the ca:r, doesn't he?

[40 lines omitted]

53. C HOW DO I TRACK HIM DOWN?
54. CT U'm (.) *surely* if he is, was your bur-boyfriend you'd know where he is, Don't
55. you know uh *anything* at *all* about him? "You know.
56. C ((Crying sounds))
57. CT If he's your *bo:friend* you should *at least* know where, what kind of guy he
58. is . . .

If we put the first half of this interchange in the context of friendly "girl-talk," we might be able to evaluate the call-taker's initial questions as harmless, or even as portraying interest in the caller's romantic life. But because the caller is reporting her car stolen, there is more at stake than just a friendly interest in the "stealer." By asking whether the thief is the caller's boyfriend, and how long they have been together, the call-taker is not only gathering information. She is simultaneously implying that the caller may not have common sense. By

asking if the thief is her boyfriend, the call-taker is forcing the caller to acknowledge out loud that her loved one is essentially a criminal. By admitting that her boyfriend stole her car, the caller simultaneously opens herself up to being judged as foolish, ignorant, or stupid. Indeed, fieldnotes from participant observation illustrate how call-takers make fun of such women:

Call-taker Tiffany hangs up from a call, looks at Christy and me and says, "God, some people are so retarded." Tiffany then mimics a female caller, sing-songing in a high-pitched voice, "I've been dating this guy for a week and I let him use my car . . ." "He's in prison, but I don't know his last name." (fieldnotes).

This fieldnote excerpt reflects a regular call-taker practice of mocking women who naively trust criminally-minded boyfriends. Likewise, questions about one's relationship to another that in everyday situations can serve as innocent information-gathering tools or even illustrate interest or concern for the other can serve to threaten another's desire to be treated intelligent when asked in the context of 911.

### *Threats to Personal Character*

Questions can also serve to paint another person as deceptive, sneaky, or in someone else's business, or, at least, can leave that impression on the person being asked the questions. To warrant 911 service, call-takers often ask questions to determine whether the person is "close enough" to the situation to be reporting about it. In the following excerpt, a bartender calls in to report that a friend has been raped. The following transcript excerpt comes about three-fourths of the way through the heated discussion:

1. C Okay what does this have to do with YOU? What does this have to do
2. anything [with you now?
3. CT [It has a lot to do with me.
4. CT WHAT? Tell me. WHAT?
5. C It has a lot to do with me, th[is is a friend] that I'm very concerned about so:
6. CT [WHAT? HOW?]

In addition to the call-taker's raised voice, his questions of how the caller is involved imply that the caller is not or should not be involved. If indeed the caller should not be involved, then questions about her involvement suggest that the caller is nosy and poking around in affairs that are none of her business. Being treated as nosy or "in someone else's business" is clearly a threat to a person's desire of being seen as good and likeable.

Questions can also implicate callers as immoral or deceptive. In the following incident, a man attempts to get information on the address of his parents. In the course of the interaction, the call-taker learns that the man not only does not know where his parents live, but he also does not know his sister's last name, a person the man claims used to work

for the Citywest police department. In the following excerpt, the call-taker asks questions about the caller's knowledge of his family:

16. CT O.k., the best thing I can do is, have you called information?  
 17. C Uhh, they have an unlisted phone number that's the problem.  
 18. CT Hmm, that's the only way unless you can get a hold of your sister (.) umm, she  
 19. [doesn't  
 20. C [Well, I can't do that, she used to work for you at one time=  
 21. CT =How long ago?  
 22. C Uhh, I'm not sure, [she  
 23. CT [Was she an officer?  
 24. C Yeah, yeah, Marcie Magid  
 25. CT Marcie what?  
 26. C Marcie Fagid, or Magid or whatever her name was (.) [Marcie?  
 27. CT [YOU DON'T KNOW  
 28. YOUR SISTER'S OWN NAME?  
 29. C u:uhhhh (.) she injured her right hand.  
 30. CT Sir, *listen to me*. You don't know your sister's own last name?

Through questions, especially the one in lines 27 and 28, the call-taker portrays the caller as seriously lacking in basic, taken-for-granted information. In urban America, people expect others to know information such as where parents live and the names of immediate relatives. When the call-taker learns that the man does not know this basic information, her questions serve to implicate the caller as certainly suspicious and possibly deceptive. For instance, he might be trying to get away with asking for information to which he should not have access. Indeed, several lines down in the same call, the call-taker finally makes her opinion explicit—an opinion that was foreshadowed in her previous questions:

36. CT Well, sir, y'know it's just kind of, pardon me for saying so, it's a little bit *odd*,  
 37. you don't know your sister's name you don't know where your parents live.  
 38. Y'know, I'm [not  
 39. C [well they're, they're somewhere back behind you there, uhh,  
 40. toward Max's Mount (.) but I can't remember the exact name of the little area  
 41. that they live in. They're up on the hill up there, behind 'ya.

The call-taker eventually terminated the call without providing the caller with information about his parents or sister.

In the preceding call, even when the call-taker expressed her opinion of the caller's being "odd," the caller did not become overtly angry. Nevertheless, when call-taker questions portray the caller as suspicious, the caller often shows indignation. Consider the following transcript excerpt in which a female caller is reporting about a man who tried to "pick her up" while she was waiting for the bus. After asking for a description of the suspect and his car, the call-taker asks the following:

1. CT (1 sec) Were you doing anything that would have given him the impression  
 2. that you *wanted a ride*?  
 3. C No:o, I wa:asn't  
 4. CT What were you *doing*?

5. C I was jus' sitten' down at the bus stop, waiten' for the bus, 'an this guy just  
6. come, like, slow down . . .

In asking whether the woman was doing anything to give the suspect the impression that the caller wanted a ride, the call-taker implies that the woman might be at fault for the situation.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the caller seems indignant in her response, which she punctuates through the elongated response of "No:o I wa:asn't" (line 3). The caller may have interpreted the call-taker's question as expressing the opinion that she must have been doing something unusual to attract the man's attention (the assumption being that cars don't pull over for no reason). We can imagine that when a man comes to the side of the road to ask a woman for a ride, that the woman might be dressed or walking in a way so as to attract his attention. Specifically, this occurs in the case of prostitution. The caller's response (line 3) seems to indicate that she finds the call-taker's question (lines 1-2) more than epistemic. The caller attempts to make it clear that she is a person of character who was not doing anything out of the ordinary to attract the man's attention.

### *The Need to Feel Unimpeded*

Callers and call-takers often have different expectations as to how much information must be offered during a 911 interaction. Call-takers are trained to ask certain questions to determine whether police service is warranted in a certain case. On the other hand, citizens who call 911 generally want to be respected in their own definition of what constitutes an emergency and would rather not answer a long list of questions. Because of this clash, callers often react to call-taker questions as if they are unnecessary, unreasonable, and an impediment to receiving immediate police service. This interactional asynchrony often results in angry citizens and exasperated call-takers.

In the following incident, call-taker Tim described a domestic violence call in which the female caller fails to answer questions. He said:

I have actually cut people off. I had a lady call and she said her boyfriend was coming in the back window and she wanted the police right there. I said, "What does he look like?" She said, "You don't need to know that shit, just get over here" I said, "Does he have a gun?" She said, "Will that get you here any quicker?" I said, "I am not buying into that," and she just started going off on me, so I just cut her off. It was obvious we were not going to get any useful information. (fieldnotes)

In this incident, the caller reacts as if Tim's questions are simply an impediment or a "hoop to jump through" in order to get police service. Similar to this incident, call-taker Shotci discussed a situation in which a female called in and stated that she had just been shot in a drive-by incident. Shotci asked the caller, "Where?" and the caller responded by screaming, "My leg, why do you need to know?" Shotci went on to question the caller about the vehicle and perpetrator's

description, and the caller responded with "Just get me some fuckin' help!"

In the two preceding incidents, the call-takers followed their training instructions to obtain descriptive information. In both situations, however, the callers became angry and swore at the call-takers. Both callers seemed to view the call-takers' questions as unnecessary. The callers were involved in violent situations, and they may have viewed the repeated questions as indication that the call-taker did not know how to gauge the seriousness of their situation appropriately. Granted, questioning always delays the sending of help, but when callers' communicative behavior indicates their belief that call-taker questions are not facilitating police action, they become frustrated and upset.

It may be important to note that more than one party's face is being threatened when callers resist answering questions. While call-takers' questions can interfere with callers' desire for immediate police service, callers' resistance to questions can simultaneously threaten call-takers' negative face needs of being unimpeded in their desire to ascertain needed information to send police help. In this way, a single questioning interaction can be interpreted by both parties as a threat to negative face.

Questions can also serve to impede upon callers' own estimation as to what is reasonable to know or do in an emergency situation. Consider the following two incidents:

A man calls back for the second time and says the suspicious vehicle he called about earlier isn't there anymore, but that they have the license plate number. Call-taker Sue asks him, "So the vehicle and suspect isn't there anymore?" The man replies, "No, did you think I was going to ask him in for lunch?" (fieldnotes)

A female caller says that there are homeless people living behind the dumpsters by her house. She says they're partying and drunk—"three guys and a Black woman." Call-taker Tim asks for a further description, specifically if the men are Black, White or Hispanic, and the caller says loudly, "I'm a single woman and I'm not going to find out." (fieldnotes)

In these two incidents, the call-takers asked seemingly harmless questions, yet the citizens reacted with anger and self-righteousness. These reactions indicate how call-taker questions may be taken by callers as insinuations that they do not know what is normal to do or know in a situation.

In addition to wanting their definition of an emergency to be unimpeded, callers may also view call-taker questions as impediments to timely service. This is especially true in violent incidents in which the caller is emotionally distraught. For instance, consider the following incident in which the caller is calling for the second time about her violent brother:

1. CT Citywest Police, Agent Mc[Kay

2. C

[WOULD YOU TRY THE POLICE OVER

3. HERE? (Screaming/crying) *HE'S BUSTIN DOWN MY WINDOWS*
4. CT (1 sec) Who's busting [down . . .
5. C [This is Tina L. please, I just [called
6. CT [Well, don't scream in
7. my ear. *Who's bustin out your windows? =*
8. C *My brother*
9. CT Your brother, is he high on drugs [or anything?
10. C [Yes, he's high and he's drunk and he's
11. bustin out all my windows, *please, god, PLEASE =*
12. CT (sound of typing) We're help, we have officers coming =
13. C = They took fifteen minutes la:ast time to get over here (crying)
14. CT (1 sec) O.k., we'll have officers out there they're coming
15. C [Please, *plea:se.*
16. CT We're on our *way* mam.
17. C (crying) Thank you.
18. CT uh huh, bye.

In this incident, the caller expresses concern with the amount of time it is taking for the police to be dispatched to her property through her pleadings (lines 6, 11, 13, 15) and by the fact that this is her second call. The caller also seems to view the call-taker's questions (lines 4, 7, 9) to be delaying police service even longer, and thereby, as constituting an infringement on the caller's need for timely service. The call-taker seemed to realize this eventually, as illustrated by her reassuring comments (lines 12, 14, 16) that an officer was on the way to the property.

Likewise, in another incident, a woman called to report that her two-year-old is missing. The call-taker proceeded to ask a series of description questions, including queries about the little boy's age, name and skin color. Within the call, the call-taker did nothing to indicate that police were on their way. Eventually, the woman, who was crying throughout, hung up, possibly to go search for the little boy. It is not possible to know for sure if the call-taker's list of questions led the woman to this action, "however, it was when the call-taker launched into her questions about appearance and race that the caller did hang up" (Tracy, 1997, p. 334).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, especially in violent situations in which the caller is emotionally upset, questions may be viewed as impediments to receiving police service.

### Conclusions and Implications

Disruptions in the interrogation sequence serve as a primary difficulty in 911 call-taking practice. In this project, I have attempted to explain one aspect that may lead to these problems. As illustrated by field data and analysis of call transcripts, 911 call-taker questions can threaten callers' desire to be treated as trustworthy, intelligent, and of good character, as well as threaten their to feel unimpeded in their requests for timely police service.

This analysis has several theoretical implications. First, it illustrates how questions do more than enable one simply to gather infor-



mation. In the course of asking questions, one can also portray another, either purposely or inadvertently, as untrustworthy, unintelligent, immoral and unreasonable. Of course, some questions can do the opposite—but here I have focused on how questions can threaten the face of callers and sometimes cause them to become angry or terminate the call.

Second, this analysis illustrates how context plays an integral role in whether questions are threatening or not. Questions that may be harmless in one arena, such as, "How long has your boyfriend lived with you?" can pose a threat in the 911 context. Furthermore, this analysis illustrates how questions intended by a speaker to be epistemic, such as "Did you get his license plate number?" can be heard by the other as expressing an opinion or attitude. This indicates that the functional type of a particular question changes depending on the context, a finding that lends support to arguments about the necessity of examining issues of facework and questioning in context (e.g., Penman, 1987, 1990; Tracy & Naughton, 1994; Woodbury, 1984).

Third, this analysis adds credence to the idea that it is difficult to separate positive and negative politeness strategies in practice (Penman, 1990; K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998). During 911 calls, the same question can simultaneously threaten a caller's "positive" face need of trustworthiness and a "negative" face need to be unimpeded in receiving police service. As Brown and Levinson note (1987, p. 67), some face-threatening acts, such as requests for personal information, intrinsically threaten both negative and positive face. Furthermore, a single questioning sequence can impede upon the face needs of both the questioner and the responder. As illustrated in the case of 911 interactions, questions can threaten callers' needs to be taken seriously and/or impede upon their desire for timely service. Meanwhile, callers' resistance to answering questions can threaten call-takers' need to be treated with respect and/or intrude upon call-takers' desire to collect necessary information before sending out the police.

Fourth, the case speaks to the appropriateness of open-ended and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions limit the range of answering and also presuppose that the questioner knows the appropriate range of answers, so in this way can be understood to be less polite than open-ended questions (Penman, 1990). However, in situations in which a speaker is able to generate a hypothesis as to the potential answer to a question, closed-ended questions can be more informative and, thus, can elicit better responses (Allwin, 1991). In the case of 911 call-taking, call-takers usually need very specific types of information that is collected routinely in most all incidents. Furthermore, as illustrated, callers occasionally have trouble answering open-ended questions such as, "Which way did the suspect go?" The analysis reported herein suggests that, because they allow for more institutionally-appropriate answers (and thus do less to threaten citizens' face needs of

being treated as intelligent), 911 call-takers should consider using closed-ended questions for queries that demand specific information.

The analysis also speaks to emergency communications practice. First, this examination illustrates how face concerns are relevant even in emergency situations. Even when time is of the essence, callers want to be treated as though they are intelligent, trustworthy, and moral, and they feel threatened when questions are perceived as interfering with their desire to receive police service. Considering this, 911 emergency communication trainers should consider educating call-takers about callers' face needs and, accordingly, institute steps for call-takers to develop what might be called their "phone face." Indeed, this study presents a picture of what the Citywest's reference to "belittling a caller" looks like. Discerning the different ways questions can be face-threatening to callers can help emergency employees better understand why the interrogation sequence can go awry.

Second, data from this study suggest that the separation of duties between call-taking and dispatching may have a negative effect on the questioning practices of call-takers. Specifically, call-takers indicate that they try to avoid being reprimanded by dispatchers for not getting enough information. This threat of organizational sanctions creates a situation in which call-takers routinely ask for more detailed information than is necessary for most incident reports, a practice that can irritate callers and may also slow the provision of police service. It would be interesting to compare the questioning practices at Citywest to those at a 911 center where one person covers both the call-taking and dispatching duties.

Third, this analysis suggests that the "persistent repetition without variation" method of asking questions, as recommended by Citywest's training manual, may not be the best advice for all 911 interactions. Call-takers should know that distraught callers in violent situations will most likely consider the call-taker to be in a "low legitimacy" role (Allwinn, 1991) and, thus, will be unwilling to answer questions. In such situations, call-takers need to be more dependent on finding the "right formulation" of their questions in order to get a response. For instance, callers can use an embedding strategy, such as, "Can you tell me if . . .," rather than the bald statement, "Tell me if . . ." Call-takers can also adapt their questions by increasing the urgency of the question (e.g., "We need a description of the suspect so the police can identify the thief") and by using premarks (e.g., "Sir, we need to have some information to send police help . . . so, what color is the car?"). Granted, it takes time to be polite, just as tactfulness takes more time than bluntness (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990/91). Nevertheless, it can take even longer to repair a problematic call. This analysis suggests that 911 training materials include information concerning how questions can be face-threatening to callers and provide suggestions for various question formulations. This information would help explain why the

911 interrogation sequence is intrinsically difficult and complex, and provide call-takers with alternatives for navigating their interactions with citizens.

The Citywest training manual states that call-takers must rely on their experience and judgment in order to make good decisions and be of value to citizens. Likewise, Goody (1978) concluded in her study of questioning across cultures that there is overwhelming evidence that questioning is not an automatic procedure, and people can become sophisticated in its use. This analysis illustrates the different ways questions can be face threatening. By understanding the face implications of questioning in the 911 context, we take an important first step in helping call-takers become more sophisticated in their question-asking, and in doing so, ease the process of gathering vital emergency information.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Names of call-takers, citizens, and locations throughout the manuscript are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup>Admittedly, callers also threaten call-takers' face; for instance, callers sometimes treat call-takers as low-status receptionists (Tracy, 1997). Because a primary goal in this paper is to provide an analysis from which call-takers' might glean practical implications for their own questioning practice, I have chosen to focus primarily on the ways in which call-taker questions can be face-threatening to callers (rather than the ways callers' talk serves to threaten call-takers).

<sup>3</sup>I thank Karen Tracy at University of Colorado-Boulder for assisting with this and other data-gathering procedures.

<sup>4</sup>Blaming female callers for their problems seemed to be a common theme among 911 personnel. Furthermore, both informal talk and formal training manuals referred to emotional or distraught callers as "hysterical." The prevalence and negative association of these gendered activities suggest that female callers may have routinely faced more difficult hurdles in being taken seriously in the 911 context and receiving police service. This is certainly an area I would suggest for future research.

<sup>5</sup>The call is fully transcribed in Tracy, 1997.

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