

# Rudeness at 911

## Reconceptualizing Face and Face Attack

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*This article analyzes two telephone calls from citizens to a 911 center in a large city in the Western United States in which call-takers became angry and attacked the face of the callers. After reviewing past theoretical conceptualizations of face and face attack, the authors analyze the calls using a facework lens. Through a close study of the discourse, the authors show the subtle and blatant ways in which vocal delivery, substance and type of selected speech acts, second pair parts, and selected stance indicators do face attack. Then, they consider how context may contribute to the call-takers' usage of these problematic conversational strategies. The article concludes by assessing how notions of face and face attack would be reconceptualized if future research adopted the grounded practical theory frame that informs this 911 case study.*

*Incident 1: A man calls 911 for a second time on a busy Saturday night to see why the police are taking so long to arrive. The telephone exchange becomes a heated dispute between operator and caller.*

*Incident 2: A woman calls seeking a second police visit for a friend who had been assaulted sexually earlier in the night. In the course of the conversation, the operator curses at the caller and hangs up on her.*

Emergency 911 call-takers are communication professionals, trained to talk with hysterical and angry callers in a calm, courteous, and directed manner that elicits critical information about callers' emergencies. Elsewhere (S. J. Tracy & K. Tracy, 1998), we identify individual- and group-level communicative practices that enable call-takers to display the institutionally expected demeanor of polite, helpful agents as they deal with the irritation, anger, and distress that they occasionally experience during calls. In this article, we focus on the flip side: instances in which call-takers

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"lost it," attacked a caller, and generally talked in a manner that could be described as incredibly rude. To describe a person's behavior as rude is to render a judgment that a person's communicative actions were intentionally displaying contempt and lack of respect. As such, rudeness is the opposite of what Goffman (1955) and Brown and Levinson (1987) regard as the normal, rational practice of social life: polite, face-attentive interaction. Goffman (1955) characterizes studies of facework as "study[ing] the traffic rules of social interaction" (p. 216). In focusing on rudeness, we are analyzing people going through red lights.

The purposes of this article are twofold: (a) to provide a detailed analysis of face attack in one important context, telephone calls between citizens and 911 operators; and (b) to use the case as a vehicle to reflect about theoretical issues regarding face and face attack. In studying face issues, in the complexity and messy particularity that is part of any actually occurring situation, we embrace K. Tracy and Baratz's (1994) argument as to the need for and value of case studies of facework.

The article begins by characterizing similarities and differences among members of the theoretical face family. Then, we present the case study. After giving background information and explicating our interpretive method, strategies of face attack that call-takers used and the contextual features that contributed to their occurrence are described. The conclusion returns to the theoretical face family to draw out the case's implications for conceptualizing face and face attack.

### THE THEORETICAL FAMILY: CONCEPTIONS OF FACE AND FACE ATTACK

Goffman's (1955) essay, "On Facework," is widely credited as the seminal piece that led scholars to give attention to face in everyday social interaction. Face, Goffman argued, is located in the flow of events (the back and forth of talk) and becomes manifest when events are interpreted. Stated a bit differently, face is the positive social persona that a communicator desires and that is implicitly established through a partner's conversational actions. Communicators typically work to maintain both their own and their partner's face; on occasion, however, they do not do this work, and a threat to one or both parties' faces occurs. Face threats, according to Goffman, can involve one of three levels of responsibility: (a) Threats can arise from innocent actions such as a faux pas or verbal gaffe, (b) threats are caused inadvertently as a result of a person pursuing a particular course of action, and (c) threats can be a result of personal maliciousness and spite. It is this third level of responsibility—when a

person's actions are seen to be deliberately nasty—that we label *face attack* and use as the initial analytic lens with which to view the 911 calls.

Of note is that these calls, as is true of any actually occurring talk, did not come theoretically labeled. We as analysts faced the task of naming what we had. Would it be better, we considered, to think of the calls as failures to manage emotion appropriately (e.g., Hochschild, 1983), defensiveness in social interaction (e.g., Stamp, Vangelisti, & Daly, 1992), or threats and/or attacks on face? As can be seen by the article's focus, we chose the last frame. We regard it as important, however, to flag that the choice was not straightforward. The 911 calls are replete with particulars that fit each of these frames (speak to central theoretical claims) as well as problematize each frame's suitability. As we will show in the analysis, the face frame enables us to make interesting practices visible in these 911 calls. At the same time, the calls enable us to look afresh at the multifaceted face frame. We return to this issue at the article's end.

Drawing on Goffman (1967), then, we define face attacks as communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive. Face attacks can range in offensiveness from displays of complete contempt to acts of mild disrespect. Our notion of face attack melds Goffman's notion of purposeful face threats with "ritual affronts," acts he defines as calculated to "convey complete disrespect and contempt though symbolic means" (Goffman, 1967, p. 89).

Goffman (1967) offers an analytically rich set of ideas to conceptualize face and face attack. Yet, although intellectually insightful, his ideas do not line up neatly with each other. For instance, he distinguishes *facework*, an unmarked version, from *aggressive facework*. Facework, in its unmarked form, involves the symbolic actions people do to keep interaction flowing smoothly; facework counteracts incidents that threaten face. Aggressive facework, in contrast, is a competitive scramble in which each person attempts to look good at another's expense. Aggressive facework presents self and partner with the ongoing potential of "losing face" and is recognizable as "bitchiness" (see pp. 24-25).

Subsequent scholars have gone on to build on and elaborate different facets of Goffman's (1967) ideas about face, facework, and face threat. Within studies of conflict and bargaining, aggressive facework is the dominant meaning for facework. Face typically is invoked to explain interactional sequences that have gone awry (see K. Tracy, 1990, for a review). However, within politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), Goffman's (1967) unmarked version is dominant. In politeness theory, people's concern for the face of their partners and, to some extent, themselves is used to understand interactional smoothness.

Politeness theory, building on the distinction between approach and avoidance rituals (Durkheim, 1954; Goffman, 1967), divides face into the positive and the negative. *Positive face* refers to each person's desire to have selected others approach and show approval and appreciation; *negative face* refers to each person's want to avoid being impinged or imposed on. Politeness theory includes two parts. The first part is an extensive catalogue drawn from an analysis of three languages and of the conversational practices through which people show each other that they regard an other as reasonable and desirable (attending to positive face) or show the other that one does not want to impose (attending to negative face). The second part of politeness theory, which has received the majority of attention, is the broad-based explanatory model predicting how three kinds of situational factors (relative social distance, power between communicators, and the size of a face-threatening act) affect selection and usage of conversational strategies and, particularly, the choice of positive or negative politeness.

Politeness theory has been used as the analytic frame to study diverse interactions (see Fraser, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 1994; Wood & Kroger, 1994, for reviews), and it significantly added to Goffman's (1967) notions of face and facework. Most important, Brown and Levinson's (1987) language strategies grounded Goffman's (1967) general claim about facework being in the flow of interaction. The theory's catalogue of positive and negative politeness strategies make visible how small conversational actions such as choosing an impersonal form over a personal one, hedging a statement, adding reluctance markers, using nickname and in-group speech forms, and so forth are the vehicles through which facework gets done. However, at the same time that politeness theory enriched Goffman's notion of face, politeness theory also led scholarly attention away from face attack as part of social life. Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987) regarded face attack as an unusual event, but in Brown and Levinson's theory, face attack as a conversational event disappears.

Politeness theory recognizes that every communicative act has face-threat potential. In performing any speech act, whether it be a request, a promise, a compliment, and so forth, there is a potential to damage the positive and negative face of a hearer, a speaker, or both. As Brown and Levinson (1987) put it, politeness theory "presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it and make possible communication between potentially aggressive parties" (p. 1). Positive and negative politeness strategies, in fact, are the ways speakers respectfully manage the face threat ever present in interaction. Yet, although face attack is connected to face threat, it is more than doing bald-on-record acts (Brown & Levinson's name for the strategy that is neither positive nor negative politeness or hinting). Face attacks are communicative actions that delib-

erately seek to insult. Undoubtedly, one way to attack another's face is to refrain from doing expected politeness work. But, to equate face attack with lack of politeness is seriously off the mark, a conclusion numerous scholars have made (e.g., Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Penman, 1990; Wood & Kroger, 1994).

Studies of situations in which social actors have complex goals, such as crisis negotiation (Rogan & Hammer, 1994) or emotional communication between spouses (Shimanoff, 1985), do not use politeness theory as their central theoretical scaffold but ground their investigation in Goffman's (1967) more multifaceted notion of face. Another tactic, evidenced in Penman's (1990) analysis of courtroom interrogation strategies and Wood and Kroger's (1994) analysis of tenure appeal letters, is to extend Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to make it a double-valenced theory of facework, one that considers strategies of contempt (face attack) as well as strategies of respect.

Although there are no studies of facework at 911, there is a considerable body of research examining emergency telephone calls. The central goal of this research is to explicate how conversational order and meaning are created in the moment-to-moment moves of participants in emergency calls. In so doing, the studies provide valuable information about the interactional structure of emergency calls and the places in which they vary (Zimmerman, 1984, 1992a, 1992b), their differences with ordinary talk, and a structural explanation of several trouble spots (Sharrock & Turner, 1978; M. R. Whalen, 1990; M. R. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990; J. Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988). This conversational analytic work provides valuable background. However, in beginning analysis of these 911 calls with a theoretical lens (concepts of face and face attack), we part ways with the conversational analytic position that rejects the use of theoretical concepts as a starting point for analysis of social interaction (e.g., Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997; Psathas, 1995). Although recognizing their criticism as a serious and legitimate one—theoretical concepts do gloss situational particulars—we nonetheless regard abstract conceptions (glosses), if built carefully and thoughtfully, as desirable. The value of being able to notice specifics within a particular exchange and connect them with a larger moral order, what a theoretical conception such as face enables, is considerable.

In sum, because our aim is to develop grounded practical theories (Craig, 1989; Craig & Tracy, 1995) that engender reflection about issues of conduct (in this case, about emergency communications institutions and individual call-takers), we approach analysis of the particular talk exchanges in this emergency communications situation theoretically sensitized to issues of face and face attack.

## THE CASE: FACE ATTACKS AT CITYWEST EMERGENCY CENTER

### Materials and Method

The focus of this article is on two telephone calls made to 911 in Citywest, a Western U.S. city with a population of one half million people. In both of the focal calls, call-takers engaged in marked face attack on the callers. At the Citywest center, civilian call-takers, trained by and working for the police department, answer 911 and regular police calls and then, with the aid of a CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) system, forward key information to dispatchers. During a 10-month period, we observed call-takers and related functions at Citywest (approximately 100 hours), collected 650 audiotaped telephone calls, conducted six semistructured interviews with call-takers, and studied Citywest's training, and policy and procedures manuals. More detailed information about the structure of the center, its routine communicative problems, and the procedures used in data collection is available elsewhere (K. Tracy, 1997b).

Of the two calls, one was given to us by a police supervisor who knew we were interested in problematic exchanges; the other came from our telephone call base. The second call was the only one in our 650-taped call base or 400-plus observational note base that contained this degree of face attack. Although call-taker initiated face attack occurred in other observed or recorded calls, it was infrequent and, compared to these two calls, low in intensity and brief in duration. Thus, face attack of the severity displayed in the soon-to-be-analyzed calls was extremely rare, no more than a tiny fraction of 1% of the calls at Citywest.

In putting these two calls in a category by themselves, we used our everyday knowledge about rudeness. Our initial impression of call-taker rudeness, a judgment we presume will be widely shared, is what the discourse analysis unpacks. Through repeated and careful listening to the calls and studying of the transcripts, we developed a detailed characterization of how discourse moves can function as face attack. In analyzing the calls, we used *action-implicative discourse analysis* (K. Tracy, 1995), a type of discourse analysis that uses ethnographic background knowledge to aid interpretation. In the analysis, we described and named the practices call-takers used and showed why they would be seen as insulting. Similar to Brown and Levinson's (1987) analysis of positive and negative politeness strategies, this analysis sought to make plausible how particular conversational moves can be understood as strategies of face attack. The analysis then linked specifics of the talk with inferences that callers and third-party observers are likely to make. The calls were transcribed using a simplified version of the Jefferson transcription system

(Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Notation is explained in Appendix A, and the complete transcript of each call is in Appendix B. In the section about contextual contributors to face attack, we warrant claims using field notes, interviews, and institutional documents.

### Conversational Practices of Face Attack

Face attack occurred at four levels of communication. Within each level were to be found subtle, context-tied strategies and blatant, context-spanning strategies. Context-spanning strategies are ones likely to be seen as face attacking in many different situations. Context-tied strategies are ones that in other conversational situations—other kinds of 911 calls or other kinds of relationships or institutional contexts—could be face neutral or even face enhancing. Consider the conversational specifics.

#### *Call 1: Checking About a Friend's Problem*

The first call occurred in the early morning hours of a Sunday, what we typically think of as late Saturday night. The caller was a woman; the call-taker was a man. The caller, a manager of a bar, had received a telephone call from an upset friend who had been sexually assaulted. The caller's exact purpose was never entirely clear; whether it was to make a complaint about prior police actions, to request the police to return to the house to do something, or to elicit more information are the possibilities.

*Vocal delivery.* Call 1 (see Appendix B) begins with the caller taking the call-taker's repeated query, "and WHAT?" (lines 5 and 7) as a request to clarify her location's cross street rather than as a request to explain the purpose of her call. When this confusion becomes clear, the call-taker interrupts the caller mid-sentence (line 8 and 9) to clarify his inquiry ("no, WHY are you calling?"). In everyday exchanges, interrupting itself may convey a lack of respect for another. In this emergency call situation, however, the need to get information as quickly as possible led to interruption occurring with some frequency and, simultaneously, makes visible a benign meaning for the act. However, although interruption in this context is reasonable, the call-taker's increased loudness throughout the call conveys irritation that the caller is slow in figuring out his meaning (lines 24, 29, 42, 48, 51, 61, 78, and 81). Moreover, because voice raising is used at junctures in which the call-taker is questioning whether the caller has adequate reasons for what she is doing (lines 78 and 81, "WHAT? Tell me. WHAT," "WHAT? HOW?"), a strong implication is set up that the call-taker sees the caller as a person with no good reasons for her actions.

That loud speech (yelling) goes with anger is well-established (Pittam, 1994). It is also, however, an attack on the other's face.

A second feature of delivery that functions as a face attack is the call-taker's use of controlled enunciation (line 24, "You haven't told me *what* you need.(.)what(.)do(.)you(.)need?"). Controlled enunciation is the practice of pausing briefly between each word of a short phrase. This enunciation style simultaneously functions to display a speaker exercising control as a strategy to control the recipient and as a marker of the speaker's irritation. Articulating each word distinctly is not a routine way of speaking. Rather, it is a practice that is used with those who may have limitations in their understanding abilities, such as might be seen with nonnative speakers, young children, or the elderly (Nussbaum, Hummert, Williams, & Harwood, 1996). When used with conversational partners who do not have limitations, controlled enunciation conveys that the speaker is working to stay in control; it marks a speaker as exerting effort not to yell. Because controlled enunciation can be interpreted either as a speaker trying not to yell or speaking very slowly so a limited other gets it, it implicates the other as unreasonable (wrong, stupid).

*Selected speech acts.* In addition to delivery styles that conveyed disrespect, the call-taker performed speech acts that challenged the caller's reasonableness. The most blatant act was the extended string of assertion/counterassertion, starting in lines 44 and 45 (Caller: "no I'm not," Call-taker: "yes you are") and continuing through line 57. This string, frequent in family conflicts (Vuchinich, 1990), is an obvious expression of arguing, a practice that the call-taker policy manual equates with discourteous behavior. Underlined and in boldface, the telephone protocol section reminds call-takers, "Do not argue." In contexts such as intellectual discussions, sequences of assertion/counterassertion are often normal (K. Tracy, 1997a). However, in a public service encounter such as this one, it is difficult to find a benign meaning for this kind of arguing sequence.

In addition to arguing, the call-taker also made several statements that function as reprimands about serious personhood issues. In line 42, in which the call-taker says to the caller, "You're getting hysterical for no reason," he performs a strong rebuke. Callers getting hysterical is routine in 911 calls. Yet, in telling the caller that her hysteria has "no reason," the call-taker is denying the legitimacy of the caller's concern about her friend's sexual assault and is offering a strong indictment of the caller's reasonableness. This reprimand, in fact, launches the argument sequence mentioned above. In addition, at the close of the call, the call-taker's statement, "You are out of line" (line 89), frames the caller as someone who is unable to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate action.



The most context-tied face attack is the use of what we label *metacommunicative directives*. Metacommunicative directives are commands about or inquiries into a caller's understanding. In Call 1, the call-taker instructs the caller to "listen to me" (lines 42 and 50) and asks, "Do you understand?" (line 34). The meaning of a metacommunicative directive is bound up with the context in which it occurs. In a classroom in which a teacher is presenting complex or difficult material, inquiries to listeners such as "Do you understand?" and "Does that make sense to you?" are likely to be seen as expressions of concern and as sensible comprehension checks. But, in a context in which the information is not technically complex, as is the case with these telephone calls, metacommunicative directives take on a different meaning. In this context, they express irritation with the caller and what the call-taker regards as the caller failing to get simple information. Metacommunicative directives are not always face attacks in the 911 context. In calls in which a caller is hysterical and not attentive to the call-taker's talk, they may be necessary and understandable directives to redirect the caller's attention, permitting important information to be obtained. It is because metacommunicative directives often are needed and are not meant to be nasty that they are a subtle form of face attack.

*Stance indicators.* Ochs (1993) argues that the process of establishing identities for self or of implying them for a partner is accomplished by performing certain speech acts and by displaying stances toward issues and the other. Stances are attitudes toward another conveyed by word and phrase choices. When a speaker's linguistic choices convey disrespect or contempt, such choices are stance indicators that do face attack. The most context-spanning type of face attack is seen in line 48 when the call-taker says to the caller, "I know what the fuck I'm talking about okay bitch." In using a form of address widely recognized as hostile (bitch) and directing obscene language toward the caller, the call-taker engages in face attack. Also, given the institutional context with its lack of any prior relationship between caller and call-taker, it is virtually impossible to hear this utterance positively, for example, as an instance of the kind of informal cursing that is meant as a marker of friendliness among acquaintances.

Considerably more subtle and less intense forms of attack are seen in the call-taker's formulations in line 33 ("like FOR WHATEVER REASON you're calling") and line 29 ("Okay. Number one, if something like that did happen"). In telling the caller that whatever reason she has, the caller will not get the information, the caller is implicated as highly unreasonable—asking for things to which no one is ever entitled. In the second instance, the caller's statement about her friend who just got raped (line 27) is responded to by the call-taker with a comment that begins with the

preface "Okay. Number one." In using the phrase *number one*, the call-taker suggests that there is an innumerable list of reasons as to why what the call-taker assumes the caller wants are unreasonable. For a call-taker explicitly to flag that there are multiple reasons for a refusal is to set up an implication that the requester should have known better than to ask.

Through the repeated use and cumulative weight of these strategies, the call-taker performed a serious face attack on the caller. Turning now to the second call, let us consider how the face-attack strategies were similar and how they differed.

### *Call 2: An Inquiry/Complaint About Wait Time*

Call 2 involved a male caller and a male call-taker (not the same person as in Call 1). Call 2 also occurred in the early morning hours of a Sunday. The caller had been assaulted and was waiting for a police officer to file a report. This call—his second of the night—was to find out when the police would be there.

*Similar face-attack strategies.* In Call 2 (see Appendix B), the call-taker's vocal delivery can be interpreted as an attack on the caller's face, although it is not as intense as that displayed in Call 1. The call-taker uses a raised tone of voice (lines 62, 75, 80, and 81) and two short segments of controlled enunciation (lines 49 and 75). He also repeatedly uses metacommunicative directives. He says, "What I'm trying to tell you is" (lines 41 and 53), "You're not listening" (line 62), "What's I'm trying(.)to tell you. Are you listenin to me?" (line 71), "Does that make any sense to you?" (line 68), and "CAN(.)YOU(.)hear what I'm sayin?" (line 75). More powerfully than in the first call, the call-taker, through his repeated use of this device, implies a view of the caller as seriously deficient in to-be-expected sense-making abilities. This view is underscored further by the call-taker's repeated prefacing of these metacommunicative directives with the phrase, "what I'm trying" (lines 41, 43, 48, and 71), a comment that admits a speaker's failure in what he or she is about. Although admission of self-failure could be a way to honor or restore another's face, in this context, it functions as further blame for the caller's unreasonableness. In addition, the call-taker and caller engage in an argument over an extended segment (e.g., the extended disagreement with "well" prefaces in lines 17-26; Schiffrin, 1987) and at the end of the call, the call-taker describes what has been occurring as arguing (line 82, "I don't have time to argue with you any further").

Subtle forms of attack are evident in the caller taker's repeated description of the call-taking scene (variations of "It's busy tonight" (lines 41, 42, and 51) and, a bit more blatantly, "You're not the only call" (lines 38, 44,

and 49). Comments about the night's busyness could be a way for a call-taker to redress a caller's face by offering an excuse that explains why service is not as fast as normal. However, because in both cases it is combined with "I'm trying to tell you" prefaces, they function to recast the caller as someone who does not pick up on reasonable scene descriptions. Moreover, in telling the caller that his is not the only call, the call-taker can be heard as criticizing the caller for failing to realize that his desire to get the police is part of a larger scene with limited resources. Call 2 uses many of the same face-attack strategies displayed in the first call. Yet, because the call-taker uses *sir* to address the caller (lines 19 and 80), a form that usually is considered polite, and because he does not curse or engage in name-calling, Call 2 may appear less face attacking than does Call 1. However, the second call-taker uses a set of conversational devices not visible in the first call that make a global assessment about which call is more face attacking less obvious.

*A different face-attack strategy: Second pair-part responses.* Within conversation analysis, a central concept is that of adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Adjacency pairs are a sequence of two actions that, with but a few exceptions, occur adjacent to each other. One action is the first pair part, and a second small set of actions is regarded as a second pair part. Invitations (first pair part) usually are followed by acceptance or rejection (second pair part), greetings by greetings, compliments by thanks, and so forth. The adjacency pair that we wish to focus on is question-answer. As Levinson (1981) notes, second pair parts for questions "are a lot freer than the question-answer stereotype would suggest. Questions can be happily followed by questions, by partial answers, statements of ignorance, denial of the question, details of the presupposition of the question, and so on" (p. 107). These different kinds of second pair parts, we argue, have markedly different face implications. Denials of the legitimacy of even asking a question (or whatever the first pair part is), especially when unaccompanied by any politeness devices, is a powerful way a call-taker frames a caller as unreasonable.

Consider how the call-taker responds to the following two caller questions:

Example 1 (lines 31-32):

Caller: for HOW LONG?

Call-taker: As long as it takes. As long as it takes.

Example 2 (lines 61-62):

Caller: How long do I have to wait though?

Call-taker: Until SOMEBODY GETS (.) THERE. You're not listening. I can't tell you any better than that.

In answering the caller's inquiries about the amount of time he would need to wait for the police, the call-taker's refusal to engage the caller's question and the absence of an explanation paint the caller as unreasonable for even asking. In so doing, it also conveys a sense that the call-taker is irritated with being asked. A denial of a speech act's legitimacy is also seen in Example 3.

Example 3 (lines 36-39):

- Caller: I've seen, I've seen four cop cars pass by.  
 Call-taker: And guess what? They haven't been coming to see you(.)Okay? You're not the only call we've got (.) so either be patient or call back later, or call back tomorrow or whatever.

The rhetorical question and response ("And guess what? They haven't been coming to see you") denies the legitimacy of the issue raised by this caller's noticing the number of police cars. This can be contrasted with a response that offered an explanation for why this could happen (e.g., "That can happen sometimes because officers take calls in terms of their seriousness"). In essence, by denying the legitimacy of the caller's noticing with a comment that seems to be rubbing it in ("They haven't been coming to see you"), the call-taker not only disparages the caller (therein engaging in face attack), but also comes across as sarcastic and hostile.

A final way a second pair part can deny the legitimacy of the act of a caller is seen in Example 4.

Example 4 (lines 64-65):

- Caller: So I could be here until five in the morning?  
 Call-taker: OK if you want to wait till five in the morning that's up to you.

In line 64, the caller poses a question ("So I could be here until five in the morning?"). Although the caller's remark is in the form of a question, it is quite implausible that it was meant as a serious request for information. By including a time projection that was more than 4 hours from the time of the assault incident in a situation in which police officers are expected to respond quickly, the caller performs a criticism. The caller's remark was intended as a sarcastic comment, not a serious information query. Yet, in line 65, the call-taker's response ("Okay if you want to wait till five in the morning that's up to you") treats the "question" as a question. In addition, the response can be seen as getting in an additional dig. In telling the caller that "he can wait until five in the morning if he wants to," against a conversational backdrop in which the caller has registered repeated displeasure about the length of his wait, the call-taker appears to be mocking the caller's wants. Treating a "question" as a question is used as a strategy of face attack in other situations. K. Tracy (1997), for instance, shows this

move to be a strategy used by academics to attack each other's face during research paper discussions.

### *Summary*

In each of these exchanges, a call-taker attacked a caller's face. Call-takers conveyed disrespect and/or contempt for callers through vocal delivery, selection of content and structure of speech acts, use of stance indicators of negativity, and performance of second pair parts that denied the legitimacy of what the caller was about. Although our analysis separated these facets of communication into separate strategies, they are overlapping levels of communicative action. At every moment of talk, speakers are choosing tones of voice, speech actions, and exact formulations. Consider now how contextual factors may be contributing to the occurrence of these incidents.

### *Face Attack and Face-Threatening Acts of Callers*

Both of the calls include multiple instances of caller actions that attack the call-taker's face, either as an individual or as a representative of the emergency institution. Callers reproached call-takers, argued with them, cursed at them, and used stance indicators that implied that the call-taker was unreasonable or inept. That callers will treat call-takers in nasty and rude ways is part of the job definition, albeit a particularly difficult part. In talking about the least favorite part of the call-taker job, a call-taker said, "The part that I really hate is the fact that they take it out on me since they can't take it out on the person that did something to them." Call-takers repeatedly reminded themselves that they should not take verbal abuse personally. But, as one call-taker noted:

It takes a while [to get used to being attacked]. Cause I know the first time a caller called up and called me a bitch, I was like hysterical. I thought, "I don't even know this person" . . . Now I just laugh and shrug it off. It takes time though.

Although much of the face attack in which callers engage seems intentional, although perhaps understandable and excusable because of their emergency situations, callers also inadvertently can threaten a call-takers' face. Such an instance is illustrated in Call 1's opening.

Example 5 (Call 1, lines 1-24):

Call-taker: Citywest nine one one, how can I help you?

Caller: Ah yes I'm sorry I wanted to get dispatch ((off phone talk))

Call-taker: This is? this is?

...

Caller: they've had someone call and say uh, they've had a someone break in, break in their home and (.) sexually assault a lady, uh, one of her roommates that was livin there, and I need to talk to a supervisor or something. (.) someone that can help me? because (.)

Call-taker: you haven't told me what you need (.) what (.) do (.) you (.) need?

In beginning the call by asking to speak with dispatch, the caller implies that the person with whom she is speaking does not have authority to send police officers. She treats the call-taker as a receptionist who screens calls for others who have real institutional authority. It may be that the caller is treating the name *dispatcher* as a generic term meant to include call-takers and dispatchers. In small towns, such as those frequently represented in television shows about 911, personnel who do both call-taking and dispatching functions are called *dispatchers*. Perhaps the caller only meant her comment, "I wanted to get dispatch," as a way to check that she was talking to the right person. Her repetition of the request, although not entirely ruling out this interpretation, makes it unlikely.

At Citywest Communications Center, police dispatchers do not speak directly with citizens; rather, they dispatch based on written problem descriptions that are forwarded from call-takers' computers. Analysis of citizens' problems and judgments are the responsibility of 911 operators. That people do not like to be treated as having lower institutional statuses than they do (having fewer rights and decision-making responsibilities than they do) we take to be an obvious feature of social life. Thus, situations in which call-takers are treated as persons of no authority, even assuming it was done unintentionally, are instances of face-threatening acts. In sum, situations in which callers engage in face attacks and inadvertent face threatening acts will challenge call-takers' enactment of courteous demeanor.

### *Institutional-Citizen Expectation Mismatches*

Citizens and call-takers do not share completely overlapping expectations about what is reasonable behavior for requesters and requestees in emergency calls. Call-takers go through several months of training in which they learn how to see the world from the institutional perspective and come to understand help in the particular ways the institution is willing and able to deliver its services. This understanding often diverges from that of everyday citizens, with mismatched expectations especially prevalent around four issues (K. Tracy, 1997b): (a) whether the caller is in an appropriate geographic location for police help, (b) what information-giving obligations a caller incurs in calling 911, (c) what counts as timely service, and (d) if a request for help is of the type that police can address.

When the content of a call bears on any of these four issues, there is likely to be at least mild interactional difficulty. Much like cuts that are reopened through small knocks, phone calls that bring these issues to the front are places that can escalate to face attack more easily than can other issues. Call 2 appears to be a clear case in which this happens. The caller is making a second call after waiting for what he saw as a reasonable amount of time; police, however, had not shown up. Whether Call 1 concerns one of these places of mismatch is not clear. It seems possible that the situation may have involved a civil dispute. The caller's story about her friend expecting a man whom she is dating to visit her bedroom (but not the person who actually did) and her repeated criticism of the police for not doing something because (lines 62-63) "there's no forced entry. I'm sorry there's no forced entry" make it plausible that the woman and the man who attacked her may have been fighting about their relationship definition, and police at the scene judged the problem as unsuitable for a criminal charge.

### *The Work Environment*

Not only are callers' conversational actions, and the above mentioned mismatches, conditions that increase the likelihood of face attack, so too can features in the immediate work environment. Certain times of the day, week, and year are especially likely to be challenging to call-takers. In addition, calls that occur in the window of time in which police officers are changing shifts may take somewhat longer to address than calls at other times. Unless a citizen's problem is the highest level of seriousness, calls at this time are more likely to take longer to receive attention. Call 2, a call that came in at 1:52 a.m., following an initial call that had occurred an hour and a half earlier, would appear to be one affected by this shift-change factor. In addition, these calls occurred on a hot summer night during hours that are especially prone to trouble (around bar-closing time), suggesting that a set of workplace stressors were at play.

Aside from the immediate work environment, the likelihood of face attack is affected by the larger institutional scene within which work is done and given meaning. If institutional policies are unreasonable, if personnel feel unappreciated and unfairly treated, or if call-takers are asked to perform tasks for which they have received little or no training, we might expect their willingness to engage in the demanding work of being courteous and of controlling negative feelings to be relatively low. Although institutional structure does not link to face attack in a straightforward manner, it undoubtedly influences incident frequency. For instance, several years earlier, Citywest center had instituted changes in working conditions (e.g., building in official breaks, allowing eating at

stations) that led call-takers to feel more positive about their work and that led to a reduction in the number of citizen complaints.

### Final Thoughts About the Case

Our purpose in analyzing these two 911 calls has been neither to blame nor to excuse the call-takers. The assignment of responsibility for problems is a necessary and important part of institutional life. The fixing of blame, however, is highly particular and is best done in the context of extensive information. For instance, to assess if the call-takers in these calls had made minor and easily excusable missteps or had failed to accomplish important institutional goals would require a more detailed sense of what was occurring in the center and on the streets. Exactly how busy was each site, and had there been difficult moments earlier? Had complaints about rudeness been made before?

In terms of implications for future communicative conduct at 911, this study has two. First, by introducing the notion of subtle face-attack strategies to call-takers during their training, call-takers would be able to expand the number of features of communication about which they could reflect in doing their work. Building into training a simplified version of the kind of discourse analysis in this article—encouraging call-takers to take the role of callers and to consider how talk conveys respect or contempt—would enable call-takers to understand better the significance of their in-the-moment vocal tone, word phrasing, and speech-act choices. In addition, the analysis of contextual features suggests that a helpful component of training would be desensitizing call-takers to being yelled at and called names. Although training prepared call-takers to manage hysterical callers, less attention was given to angry callers, a not uncommon event in this and undoubtedly other large city centers.

### RECONCEPTUALIZING FACE AND FACE ATTACK

This analysis focused on two instances of a rare event—obvious and sustained rudeness at a large-city 911. We chose this context- and process-specific focus because of our interest in developing grounded practical theory (Craig, 1989; Craig & Tracy, 1995). In contrast to the conversational analytic commitment to developing detailed, descriptive accounts of interactional structures before theorizing (Psathas, 1995) or to mainstream social science's goal of explaining relationships among theoretically salient variables (Bostrom & Donohew, 1992), grounded practical theory elevates usefulness as the central criterion. How well can a set of concepts help participants in a practice reflect thoughtfully about what they should do? Consider four issues.



## Selecting and Defining Key Terms

Goffman (1967) treats face in the singular; Brown and Levinson (1987) split it in two; Lim and Bowers (1991) divide it in three. At the broad definitional level, we favor Goffman's (1967) conception that links face, as a single thing, to situated persons. It is not that Brown and Levinson's (1987) (or Lim & Bowers, 1991) conception is wrong, but rather that their conceptions suggest the significance of either positive or negative face when they invariably are muddled and intertwined in practice. Moreover, it promotes the sense that if an analyst accurately attaches the labels (e.g., the caller having to wait for an officer as a threat to his negative face, the call-taker being treated as a receptionist as a threat to his positive face), then the important analytical work has been done. But to highlight positive and negative face threat in this way is to take attention away from the particular way in which face is at stake. Treating a person as a receptionist is not a threat to positive face in and of itself, but rather is so because call-takers have a higher status job, albeit one with similarities to a receptionist position. Keeping face in the singular is more likely to promote the recognition that people's face concerns are always multiple and contextually shaped.

Facework, we suggest, is best defined as communicative action that is implicative for one or the other party's face. When the focus is on the other-directed force of communicative actions and these actions are evaluated as disrespectful and/or contemptuous, we are dealing with face attack. This conception of facework is consistent with Penman's (1990) continuum that considers communication in terms of whether it enhances, minimally protects, threatens, or depreciates the face of self or other. In her system, then, face attack would refer to communicative actions that threaten or depreciate the other. An advantage of defining facework and face attack in this way is that it opens up categories of communicative action for reflection.

For instance, even in Wood and Kroger's (1994) detailed elaboration of the facework process, facework is equated with a relatively small set of communicative choices. Facework is conceived of as being dependent on a central speech act as well as on antecedent and subsequent acts, each of which may be downgraded or upgraded through subtle choices (e.g., between *can* or *could*, and *face markers*, e.g., address forms, other positive and negative politeness strategies). What remains absent, however, is the sense that a central component of facework revolves around the substance of speech actions. Facework is implicated not only in deciding to perform a criticism, but also in choosing to criticize someone for being "hysterical for no reason" or "out of line", rather than for "needing to calm down" or "not being fair." Facework is an embedded activity; any feature of communication that varies potentially is doing facework.

### Conceptualizing Facework Strategies

In an early critique of politeness theory, Craig et al. (1986) argued for the importance of distinguishing politeness as a strategy from politeness as a social judgment. This study of 911 calls further attests to the importance of this distinction. Face attack, we argue, is best conceived as a social judgment. To keep a theoretical space between conversational practices (potential face-attack strategies) and situated outcomes (a judgment that someone was being deliberately rude) is to encourage reflection about other possible meanings of what someone has said.

Clearly, some conversational practices routinely engender the judgment of face attack (e.g., profanities and yelling), and others lead to that judgment under only highly specific circumstances. The distinction between context-tied and context-spanning strategies developed here offers a way to highlight that difference. Context-spanning strategies are those that could be and usually are identified in institutional training manuals; context-tied strategies rarely are. Yet, it is a communicator's ability to avoid not only what is specifically prohibited, but also all the subtle ways disrespect can be expressed that separate skilled communicators from their mediocre counterparts. The notion of context-tied strategies then should enable people to reflect beyond what is most obvious. In addition, naming and describing context-tied strategies and unpacking the reasoning that links these strategies to face attack makes available models of *situated reflection*.

### Connecting Context to Strategy Use

In identifying contextual contributors of face attack, this analysis has conceived of context as a layered phenomenon that is linked, albeit loosely, to face-attack strategies, including both proximal (features of the caller's talk) and distant (features of the immediate and ongoing work environment) factors. Recognizing context as concentric circles of influence that contribute to problematic action seems crucial for practical reflection. Also, we regard it as important to focus on factors that further rather than halt reflection about how to act. In people's everyday problem analyses, difficulties are often explained by linking person categories (e.g., gender) with predispositions regarded as stable (e.g., aggressiveness). For instance, a male call-taker mentioned that he thought female call-takers were better able to take "crap" from callers. Aside from the self-justification and other-depreciation inherent in such a comment, the implied generalization (women manage face attacks better) may be true. However, even

if it were, having knowledge of probabilistically true generalizations such as this one would not aid individual and institutional action. It would be morally strange (in fact, reprehensible) to argue that face attacks from men should be treated as more acceptable than those from women, or that individual men should be prohibited from being call-takers because, in general, women are more skilled. In sum, a practical theory approach directs research attention to those aspects of context that are implicative for personal and institutional reflection and action.

### Linking Emotion to Face Attack

Repeatedly, this analysis made links between face-attack strategies and emotion, arguing that face attacks were marking simultaneously the call-taker as feeling some kind of negative emotion: irritated, angry, hostile, and so forth. In commenting on a sequence of facework that Goffman (1967) labeled the *corrective process*, he noted:

It is plain that emotions play a part in these cycles of responses, as when . . . anger [is expressed] because of what has been done to one's own [face]. I want to stress that these emotions function as moves, and fit so precisely into the logic of the ritual game that it would be difficult to understand them without it. (p. 23)

Strategic action and emotional expression are often discussed as if they were entirely different kinds of conduct, one being planned, the other being spontaneous. It is important, we would argue, to see face attack as being, at one and the same time, these two opposite kinds of actions. As Billig (1987) argues, "Because every absolute principle has the character of overstepping the bounds of reality, each principle needs to be held in check by the countervailing force of contrary principles" (p. 211). On one hand, face attacks are spontaneous, nonstrategic, albeit deliberate actions and enactments of out-of-control negative feelings. When we conceive of face attack in this way, we as analysts are led to encourage tolerance for others' as well as our own occasional rudeness and interactional blow-ups.

On the other hand, face attacks are strategic acts for which people should be held accountable. Managing one's heart, to use Hochschild's (1983) words, not only is a routine expectation of much service work, but also, particularly in an emergency communication context, is a reasonable and desirable state of affairs. Conceiving of face attack as strategic can assist people in seeing alternative courses of action where they might otherwise have had no sense of control.

## APPENDIX A

### Transcription

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Punctuation marks: Indicate intonation

Period = falling intonation.

Question = rising intonation.

Comma = nonterminal continuation.

Colon = prolonged syllable. Number of colons indicate length of prolonged sound.

Hyphen = syllable that is abruptly cut off.

Other symbols

Capital letters = speech that is louder than surrounding speech.

\*Word\* = speech that is quieter than surrounding speech.

>Word< = speech that is faster than surrounding speech.

Underline = word or syllable that is emphasized.

(.) = hearable brief pause, about .2 seconds.

(Pause) = pause that is longer than the brief pause.

Parentheses ( ) = transcriptionist doubt. Length of parentheses offers rough indicator of length of undecipherable speech.

Double parentheses (( )) = used to describe interactional state or nonspeech activity. For example ((sobbing)) or ((off phone talk)).

Brackets [ ] = overlapping speech.

Equal sign = a continuous stream of speech with no overlap or break.

... = a segment of text that has been elided.

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## APPENDIX B

### 911 Telephone Calls

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Call 1 (4:25 a.m., Sunday, July 1995)

1 Call-taker: Citywest 911, how can I help you?

2 Caller: Ah yes I'm sorry I wanted to get dispatch ((off phone talk))

3 Call-taker: This is? this is?

4 Caller: My name is Ellen Wertheron? off of Velemonde?

- 5 Call-taker: um hmm. (pause) and WHAT?
- 6 Caller: I'm sorry?
- 7 Call-taker: and WHAT?
- 8 Caller: Velemonde I don't know what's the cross street [is here
- 9 Call-taker: [no WHY are you calling?
- 10 Caller: Okay. Umm I had a girlfriend just call me and one of my
- 11 bartenders here, I'm the manager here, one of my bartenders is
- 12 freaking out, um they had I guess at their address is (.) three
- 13 three seven east railey, railey is R A L E S place (.) in Citywest?
- 14 Call-taker: East rales?
- 15 Caller: Rales I'm sorry, rales
- 16 Call-taker: uh huh
- 17 Caller: yeah rales place in Citywest
- 18 Call-taker: uh huh
- 19 Caller: they've had someone call and say uh, they've had a someone
- 20 break in, break in their home and (.) sexually assault a lady, uh,
- 21 one of her roommates that was livin there, and I need to talk to
- 22 a supervisor or something. (.) someone that can help me?
- 23 because (.)
- 24 Call-taker: you haven't told me what you need. (.) what (.) do (.) you (.) need?
- 25 Caller: What do I need, I have someone who's saying that there's not a
- 26 brea-th-, someone did not break, enter into a home. Oka:y?
- 27 someone-, one of my, one of my friends just got raped in this
- 28 house and no one's doin anything about it.
- 29 Call-taker: Okay. number one, if something like that did happen, NO, the
- 30 information cannot be given out over the telephone. Because of
- 31 confidentiality.
- 32 Caller: whaduyu mean information?
- 33 Call-taker: like FOR WHATEVER REASON you're calling me, NO, no one
- 34 can tell you anything over the telephone. Oka:y? Do you
- 35 understand? to protect the confidentiality of whoever's
- 36 involved.
- 37 Caller: okay well can you dispatch someone else out to this property?
- 38 (pause)
- 39 Call-taker: out to =
- 40 Caller: = can you find out somethin that's goin on over there because
- 41 we hav-, I'm trying to close the bar right now

- 42 Call-taker: okay. okay Listen to me alright? you're getting hysterical for no  
43 reason
- 44 Caller: no I'm not =
- 45 Call-taker: = yes you are.
- 46 Caller: I had a friend that just got raped, you don't know what the fuck  
47 you're even talking about
- 48 Call-taker: I know what the fuck I'm talking about okay bitch.
- 49 Caller: no you don't
- 50 Call-taker: Now listen to me. (pause) The poli:ce (.) have already been  
51 informed and have taken care of it, OKAY?
- 52 Caller: Are you sure about that?
- 53 Call-taker: Yes I'm sure [about that].
- 54 Caller: [(the Citywest PD?)
- 55 Call-taker: Yes I'm sure about that.
- 56 Caller: Are you sure?
- 57 Call-taker: I am SURE.
- 58 Caller: How're they takin care of it? goin in and tellin this girl there's  
59 no forced entry.
- 60 (pause)
- 61 Call-taker: I don't know WHAT you're talking about, what girl?
- 62 Caller: Well I just got a call back from her ba:wlin on the phone, talking  
63 to one of my bartenders, comin in an' telling me, th-, that there  
64 not gonna do anything about it because there was no forced entry.
- 65 (pause)
- 66 Call-taker: Okay now I don't know [what
- 67 Caller: [there's three people living in the home that can walk into the  
68 home at anytime that they want to (.) she's dating the  
69 gentleman, she's there, there two thah a:h, a couple there, a lady,  
70 a female, a:nd my bartender. Lady thought that th-, the  
71 gentleman was coming into her room, someone ended up  
72 coming into their home and started to rape her, to ripping off her  
73 clothes and she turned around and realized it wasn't him. Now  
74 there's no forced entry. I'm sorry there's no forced entry.
- 75 Call-taker: Okay what does this have to do with YOU? What does this have  
76 to do anything [with you now?
- 77 Caller: [It has a lot to do with me.
- 78 Call-taker: WHAT? Tell me. WHAT?

- 79 Caller: It has a lot to do with me, th[is is a friend] that I'm very concerned  
80 about so:
- 81 Call-taker: [WHAT? HOW?]
- 82 Call-taker: yea:h so
- 83 Caller: And they're sending an officer over there telling her that they  
84 can't do anything about it cause there's no forced entry?
- 85 (pause)
- 86 Call-taker: But it's not what the officers told her. So I don't know what  
87 you're hearin but you're hearing wrong okay so you just calm  
88 down (.) and be quiet. The police have taken care of this matter.  
89 She's in good hands (.) and you are out of line.
- 90 Caller: oh yea:h
- 91 Call-taker: good bye

## Call 2 (1:52 a.m., Sunday, July 1995)

- 1 Call-taker: Citywest police emergency.
- 2 Caller: Yeah, I called like a hour 'n a half ago.
- 3 Call talker: About what?
- 4 Caller: An assault. We'll be there in about an hour, you said. I think this  
6 is the same person I talked to.
- 7 Call-taker: No:o I haven't talked to you.
- 8 Caller: OK (.) well uh ((little laugh/sigh))
- 9 Call-taker: Are you calling from the same place?
- 10 Caller: No sir, like down the street.
- 11 Call-taker: where'd you call from the first time?
- 12 Caller: Sweet Pappas.
- 13 Call-taker: Kay, why didn't you stay there?
- 14 Caller: What's that?
- 15 Call-taker: Why didn't you stay (.) there?
- 16 Caller: Huh (.) I was there for an hour and an half.
- 17 Call-taker: Well, ya gotta understand that it's a busy night ( )
- 18 Caller: Well what he said, an HOUR.
- 19 Call-taker: Well I don't know what somebody told you sir, I'm trying to tell  
20 you alright?
- 21 Caller: Well what he said was in the hour and I was there =
- 22 Call-taker: = well I didn't tell you that, OK? What you needed to do was  
23 stay where you were calling from.

- 24 Caller: Well you just asked me why I wasn't there so I'm telling you  
25 why.
- 26 Call-taker: Okay well could be that the police have already been there and  
27 you weren't there.
- 28 Caller: No sir I've been there the whole time.
- 29 Call-taker: Okay well go on back and wait.
- 30 (pause)
- 31 Caller: for HOW LONG?
- 32 Call-taker: As long as it takes. As long as it takes.
- 33 Caller: As long as it takes?
- 34 Call-taker: Yes, I can't answer that question any better for ya. It's going to  
35 be a ( ) night.
- 36 Caller: I've seen, I've seen four cop cars pass by.
- 37 Call-taker: And guess what? They haven't been coming to see you (  
38 Okay? You're not the only call we've got (.) so either be patient  
39 or call back later, or call back tomorrow or whatever.
- 40 Caller: ( )
- 41 Call-taker: What I'm trying to tell you is we've got, it's been busy tonight.
- 42 Caller: Do you have my other call on record?
- 43 Call-taker: If you called, yeah it's here. That's what I'm trying to tell ya it's  
44 busy, ya know, you're not the only call we got.
- 45 (pause)
- 46 Caller: Well I mean you don't even have access tah, seeing if I called  
47 in? (.) I mean
- 48 Call-taker: You said you did. I believe you did, OK? What I'm trying to tell  
49 you is that you're not the only call (.) we (.) have (.) tonight.
- 50 Caller: I understand=
- 51 Call-taker: =it's very busy.=
- 52 Caller: I understand=
- 53 Call-taker: =Now, you, your choi-, your
- 54 Caller: But if all I did was ( ) they'd be here in a second.
- 55 Call-taker: Your choices, your choices are, well you're not getting in trouble  
56 so its a different situation okay?
- 57 Caller: Well I know but I don't understand somethin.
- 58 Call-taker: Well there's lots of calls pending alright? that's what you're  
59 understanding. Now you've got two choices, go back and wait



- 60 or go home and call later=  
 61 Caller: =How long do I have to wait though?  
 62 Call-taker: Until SOMEBODY GETS (.) THERE. You're not listening. I can't  
 63 tell you any better than that.  
 64 Caller: So I could be here until five in the morning?  
 65 Call-taker: OK if you want to wait till five in the morning that's up to you.  
 66 Caller: Is that what you are sayin?  
 67 Call-taker: I'm saying when somebody's available, we'll send 'em (.) that's  
 68 what I'm saying. Does that make any sense to you?  
 69 Caller: Who do I gotta call for like a bank robbery or somethin? I don't  
 70 get it.  
 71 Call-taker: What's I'm trying (.) to tell you. Are you listenin to me?  
 72 Caller: Well yeah=  
 73 Call-taker: =Okay do you hear what I'm sayin?  
 74 Caller: (.) doesn't make sense to me.  
 75 Call-taker: CAN (.) YOU (.) hear what I'm sayin?  
 76 Caller: If I called and said somebody was raping my girlfriend, you'd  
 77 be here in two seconds=  
 78 Call-taker: We might not be because you  
 79 Caller: YOU WOULD BE=  
 80 Call-taker: =SIR you're not the only call we've got now, you've got one of  
 81 two choices, like I tol' you. Go back and wait or GO HOME, I  
 82 don't have time to argue with you any further I've got other  
 83 calls pending. ((CT disconnects))
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