

FACE-THREATENING ACTS AND POLITENESS THEORY: CONTRASTING SPEECHES FROM SUPERVISORY CONFERENCES

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Recent studies have reported the logic and substance of supervisor-student teacher conference discourse, reported difficulties that aspiring supervisors face when conducting instructional conferences, and demonstrated the usefulness of conversation analysis and discourse analysis for exploring related problems in order to address the developmental needs of supervisors, particularly those in training.¹ Hymes has argued that a fairly radical perspective, one focused on local schools and observation of situated activity, is essential.² Using transcriptions of audio- and videotaped conferences from local schools and individual settings, this article reports on a study of the claim that face-threatening acts (FTAs) committed during supervisor-teacher interactions, particularly the post-observation instructional conference, determine the politeness levels of both the supervisor and teacher. These speech acts by instructional supervisors are intrinsically imbued with elements of distance, power, and threat.³ The findings presented here constitute an examination of the predictions of politeness theory and the substrategies employed by instructional supervisors. The analysis focuses primarily on enabling super-

¹Kenneth M. Zeichner and Dan Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (Spring 1985): 155-173; Jo Roberts, "Administrator Training: The Instructional Conference Component," *Journal of Educational Administration* 29 (No. 2, 1991): 38-49; Jo Roberts, "In Preparation for the Public School Principalsip: What Our Interns Are Saying," *AASA Professor* 10 (Winter 1988): 7-9; Duncan Waite, "Conferences and Contexts: Supervisors' Verbal Moves" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, Athens, GA, November 1990); John A. Retallick, "Clinical Supervision and the Structure of Communication" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April 1990); Jo Roberts, "The Relevance of Discourse Analysis of Supervisory Conferences: An Exploration" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, Athens, GA, November 1990).

²Dell H. Hymes, *Ethnolinguistic Study of Classroom Discourse*. Final report to the National Institute of Education April 1982.

³For related discussions, see Elizabeth L. Holloway, Richard D. Freund, Sharon L. Gardner, Mary L. Nelson, and Barbara R. Walker, "Relation of Power and Involvement to Theoretical Orientation in Supervision: An Analysis of Discourse," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 36 (January 1989) 88-102; Duncan Waite, "Behind the Other Set of Eyes: An Ethnographic Study of Instructional Supervision" (unpublished diss., University of Oregon, August 1990).

vision researchers to formulate elements of supervision interaction theory—specifically to determine the circumstances in which each of the five politeness strategies will be selected by supervisors.

BACKGROUND

The Riskiness of Face-Threatening Acts

When taking another person's feelings into consideration, people speak or put things in such a way as to minimize the potential threat in the interaction. In other words, *they use politeness*. Politeness theory posits that the use of politeness increases with coordinate increases in three variables that can be combined additively: distance, power, and threat (known also as risk of imposition or extremity).⁴ In supervisor-teacher interactions, *distance* refers to the degree of social familiarity of the two people. Familiars usually are more casual and more polite with each other. Less distance may occur between a supervisor and a teacher who at one time were team teachers or who are also friendly neighbors. Distance may also consist of elements of feeling, or liking, and interactive closeness.⁵

Power refers to the ranking, status, or social station of the two persons. Since the teacher essentially stands lower than the supervisor in social, or at least hierarchical station, we would expect that the teacher has reason to be more polite, and the supervisor less. This may be reversed, however, when the teacher feels he or she "holds rank" over a new or inexperienced supervisor or supervisor-in-training by virtue of experience or other variables.

Threat may center on the importance of what is being requested (or implied indirectly as a request for action) by the speaker, the supervisor. In addition, if the hearer (teacher) perceives either interference with his or her self-determination or a lack of approval, then a threat or intrusion is felt; this requires increased attention by the supervisor to the teacher's feelings and is known as a threat to positive or negative face (explained below). Threat is intrinsically greater, for example, when a teacher performs so poorly as to need extensive assistance with basic teaching methods than if the teacher needs to refine a single routine teaching skill. Such a threat appears to be compounded if the teacher is denied the opportunity to reflect on his or her

⁴Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, "Universals in Language Usage. Politeness Phenomena," in *Questions and Politeness Strategies in Social Interaction*, ed. Esther N. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1978), pp. 60–89.

⁵*Social familiarity* has been shown to have little or no effect on politeness, while *liking* appears to increase politeness as it increases. See, for example, Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies," *Language in Society* 18 (June 1989): 159–212.

teaching and to determine for himself or herself an appropriate course of action.⁶

Thus, a supervisor who asks an experienced but familiar teacher to make a significant and difficult change in teaching methods would probably employ a higher level of politeness because of the increased weightiness or riskiness of the FTA. Determining the level or strategy of politeness is usually a rapid decision based on the supervisor's estimate/calculation of contextual elements including distance, power, and threat—all culturally complex items.⁷

The Concept of Face and Coordinate Politeness Strategies

Positive face is each person's want that his or her own desires be desirable to others—that others want for him or her to have such things as health, self-esteem, and successful professional practice. A threat to a teacher's positive face occurs when the teacher perceives criticism or insult (or disapproval, complaint, disagreement, contradiction, out-of-control emotions, irreverence, the bringing of bad news, noncooperation, interruption, non sequiturs, inattention) from a supervisor.

Negative face is each person's want to be free from imposition and distraction. In instructional conferences, a threat to a teacher's negative face occurs when a supervisor's directive or request (suggestion, advice, reminder, threat, warning, dare, offer, promise to help, compliment showing envy or admiration, expression of strong negative emotion) is perceived as an intrusion into the teacher's self-determination. Expressed doubt, disagreement, even indirect requests, which are known to be candidates for offense, may have this effect.

⁶For discussions of the necessity of reflection and considerations of fit and ability, see Peter P. Grimmert and E. Patricia Crehan, "Barry A Case Study of Teacher Reflection in Clinical Supervision," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 5 (Spring 1990): 214–235; Jo Roberts, "The Relevance of Discourse Analysis of Supervisory Conferences: An Exploration" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, Athens, GA, November 1990).

⁷Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The authors have suggested that while distance, power, and threat (called extremity) are universal determinants of politeness levels, the ways in which power, distance, and threat are calculated are *culturally specific*. In *Culturally Responsive Supervision: A Handbook* (in press, Teachers College Press), C.A. Bowers and David J. Flinders expand on the concepts of what they have termed "responsive teaching" to argue for a supervisor's clear recognition of classroom language and culture patterns that reflect fundamental cultural differences. They also note that similar patterns contribute to breakdowns in communication between the supervisor and teacher. In their approach, the supervisor, who has the ability to read the subtleties of classroom interaction, is a third party who helps the teacher formulate and clarify instructional problems. While the authors argue for careful attention to the teacher's language, metaphors, tone, diction, and body language, and then suggest that in the supervisory conference the patterns of turn-taking, pacing, and gestures play into the complex task of framing social interaction, they do not detail how to recognize and address such issues in conference interaction the same way they do with teachers. I suspect many of the same issues are operating here and thus warrant examination.

The supervisor's speech acts, then, call for *politeness strategies* to mitigate interference with self-determination (negative face) and approval or self-esteem (positive face).⁸ Supervisors use higher politeness strategies with riskier FTAs, with no risk, the FTA is done baldly, with no redressive or softening action. At the highest risk level, the supervisor's strategy would seem to be the other extreme. Don't perform the FTA. Intermediate risk levels call for substrategies of positive and negative politeness, including, for example, hedging statements, exaggerating approval, joking, seeking agreement in safe topics, asserting common ground, being indirect, apologizing, stating the FTA as a general rule, giving deference to the teacher, minimizing the imposition, or giving something desired to the teacher. An additional facet of these strategies involves going *off-record* or making the supervisor's intention ambiguous or understandable only by inference, thereby absolving the supervisor of responsibility and accountability for the FTA, which can then be denied.⁹

In some cases, a supervisor may fail to protect a teacher's face. It is possible that the supervisor's message is urgent ("You may be dismissed if you cannot improve"), that communication is poor, or even that the supervisor feels rage and *intends* to hurt the teacher. In the case of rage, the FTA may be on-the-record and not redressed—done baldly. Common ground, empathy, approval, and the gentleness of being indirect all disappear from the supervisor's talk under these circumstances.

QUESTIONS AND METHOD

This article reports on part of a larger concurrent study conducted in southwestern and southern public school districts. The findings presented here constitute an analysis of the interaction performance of instructional supervisors as they conducted postobservation conferences with teachers. Among the questions addressed in the study were the following

- Do supervisors protect teachers' face? Are face-threatening acts redressed or done off-record?
- Do supervisors tend to select higher-numbered politeness strategies as the perceived risk in the conference increases?
- Are there differences among supervisors with varying levels of experience as to selection of politeness strategies in regard to face threat?

⁸See Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work," in *Where the Action Is* (London: Penguin Press, 1969), pp. 3–36.

⁹For a discussion of related conventions of the original Brown/Levinson theory, as well as some differences in interpretations regarding politeness strategies ordered against estimated risk of face loss, see Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies," *Language in Society* 18 (June 1989): 159–212. Brown and Levinson concede that positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record may be erroneously ranked unidimensionally, and R. Brown and Gilman have collapsed positive and negative politeness into a super strategy.

Selection of the supervisors was based on a preliminary analysis of data from two protocols, including supervisors' written reports documenting case backgrounds and interpretations, and transcripts of video- and audiotapes of conferences. In several cases the database (taped conference observations and documents) was supplemented by interviews to clarify significant points and ensure a broad base of representation by experience and gender within the sample. Pattern matches across case reports were sought and cross-case conclusions were drawn. To test the application of politeness theory to supervisory conferences, the documents and transcripts were searched for speeches including (1) contrasting dimensions of distance, power, and intrinsic threat, (2) face threatening acts, which required interpreting and classifying speaker intent as suggested by speech-act theory,¹⁰ (3) varying amounts of redress, including substrategies of positive and negative politeness, and (4) evidence related to estimated risk of face or weightiness. Codes were developed and tested for interrater reliability.

SUPERVISORS' POLITENESS STRATEGIES. FINDINGS

The three experienced and four beginning supervisors (the latter including two first-year supervisors, one novice, and one postulant from the field of social services) performed a total of 155 face-threatening acts (FTAs) in their seven instructional conferences. These acts included 17 orders, 11 demands, 75 requests (of which 52 were indirect requests for action), 21 suggestions, 1 plea, 5 whimperatives (conjunction of a question and an imperative), and 25 loaded questions or traps. The frequency of these kinds of FTAs ranged from 4 to 52 per conference, with a mean of 22 per conference. Collectively, the supervisors were more likely to threaten negative (88 FTAs) than positive (66 FTAs) face, and, of the alternatives available, they used less polite strategies when performing the FTAs, that is, face-threatening acts in these conferences tended to be more bald, less redressed. (See Table 1.) The most frequently used negative politeness substrategies were hedging, questioning, not assuming willingness to comply, minimizing the imposition on the teacher's self-determination, and stating the FTA as a general rule to soften the offense. The most frequently used positive politeness substrategies were exaggerating approval, avoiding disagreements by hedging, and using inclusive forms to include both teacher and supervisor in an activity. Also used were identity markers, assertions of common ground, and making actions sound reasonable.

Experienced Supervisors

In what were relatively low-risk conferences, the more experienced supervisors (Alice, Diana, and Mary) all performed an average number of

¹⁰John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969)

Table 1. Number of Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Strategies Supervisors Used During Seven Case Study Conferences

Super-visor	Experience Level*	Total FTAs	Nature of Speech							Type of Face Threat		Politeness Strategy Used				Politeness Substrategies Used	
			Order	Demand	Request	Plea	Sugges- tion	Whimper- ative	Loaded Q/Trap	Negative	Positive	Bald, On Record,	On Record, Positive Redress	On Record, Negative Redress	Off Record	Negative	Positive
Alice	experienced	20	0	0	9	0	7	1	3	14	6	1	11	5	3	16	27
Diana	experienced	14	1	0	5	0	4	0	4	8	6	6	7	1	0	2	12
Mary	experienced	27	6	1	12	0	5	2	1	24	3	8	9	7	0	9	29
David	beginner	31	2	1	22	0	2	2	2	16	15	6	12	10	1	22	23
Wilma	beginner	7	0	0	3	0	1	0	3	4	3	0	2	2	1	3	5
Jill	novice	52	8	9	21	1	2	0	11	19	32	33	9	7	1	8	11
Craig	postulant	4	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	3	2
TOTALS		155	17	11	75	1	21	5	25	88	66	54	51	33	7	63	109

*experienced. 2nd year in supervision

beginner. 1st year in supervision

novice. first experience in supervision

postulant. from another field, first year

FTAs In doing so, they were more likely than the less experienced supervisors to present a combination of direct and indirect speech acts to achieve their ends, and they escalated from indirect to direct speech acts as required by teacher responses. These supervisors performed more threats to negative face than positive face, thus imposing more on the teacher's self-determination. Compared with the less experienced group, the more experienced supervisors were also less polite (more bald) and did not align their redressive actions for their FTAs with the nature of the acts, they were more likely to perform positive redress disproportionate to the number of threats to positive face. The effect was one of "telling you what to do but reassuring you that you're O.K." (See Table 2.)

The following descriptions, derived from analyzed transcriptions and written reports on supervisor and teacher reflections on the conferences, characterize the experienced supervisors' behaviors (see Table 3).

Case #1 The Director Alice, the most experienced of the supervisors, asserts common ground as she describes her beliefs to the teacher during the conference "We believe in excellence. We believe in concern. We believe in learning!" For Alice, the primary purpose of a conference is to effect change, even if it requires a strong push on the part of the supervisor. Because she is experienced in conferring with teachers, and because she is confident of her knowledge of instruction, Alice is certain that her words will have the desired effect the teacher will be motivated to change and will know how to change.

Alice's initial strategy for achieving her aims consists of a blend of suggestions and indirect requests:

It might not be bad to.

Ask her

Then say

I don't think she's real comfortable.

It got broken down with your use of the word *climber*

At times Alice asserts common ground to soften her suggestions, all of which are face-threatening acts:

Table 2. Characterizations of Politeness Phenomena in Seven Case Study Conferences Grouped by Supervisor Experience

Supervisor's Experience Level	Face-Threatening Act (FTA) Frequency	Nature of FTAs*	Type of Face Threats	Politeness Level	Type of Redress	Conference Risk Level
more experienced	average	indirect & direct	negative face	less polite	positive	low
less experienced	low (1 high)	indirect (1 direct)	positive & negative face	more polite	positive & negative	high

*e.g., balance of orders, demands, requests, suggestions

Table 3. Characterizations of Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Phenomena in Seven Case Study Conferences

Supervisor Experience Level	Relative Frequency of FTAs	Nature of FTAs*	Type of Face Threat	Politeness Level	Politeness Substrategies	Conference Risk Level
Alice experienced	average	direct & indirect	negative face	less redressed less polite	more positive	low
Diana experienced	average	direct & indirect	positive & negative face	less redressed less polite more bald	only positive	low
Mary experienced	high average	indirect more direct	negative face	far less polite bald	positive	low
David beginner	high	more direct	positive & negative face	more redressed less polite	positive & negative	medium
Wilma beginner	low	indirect	positive & negative face	far more polite	positive & negative	high
Jill novice	high	direct	positive & negative face	not redressed far less polite bald	positive & negative	high
Craig postulant	low	indirect	positive & negative face	far more polite	positive & negative	high

*e.g., balance of orders, demands, requests, suggestions

We might want to visit with her.

We have to remember that.

We have to keep that foremost in our minds.

I think that might be an issue of concern that *we* might want to investigate.

We have to realize that it's our students who are going to be adversely affected if *we* make a bad decision.

Ultimately, Alice escalates and pushes this experienced teacher, gives her advice, and tells her what to do:

I would probe.

I would have. . .

(You should) check later.

When the teacher gently resists Alice's suggestions because of her own interpretation of a student's needs and feelings, Alice counters, challenges, or dismisses the comments. The result is that Alice tends to threaten the teacher's negative face when it might be better to minimize the imposition of her acts on the teacher's right and need to reflect on and decide on her own acts. Furthermore, Alice chooses to soften these threats with *positive* politeness substrategies that address the teacher's self-esteem, rather than with the more appropriate *negative* politeness substrategies that align with threats to negative face:

We're getting it down!

I think by the time you finally finished talking it was O.K.

Thus the message conveyed to the teacher is, "We want to improve, don't we?"

It is significant that Alice has estimated her conference to be low-risk, by virtue of the positive feelings between herself and the teacher. However, it is, in fact, a somewhat risky conference by virtue of the slight positional distance between the two experienced participants, as well as the interference with self-determination imposed on the teacher by Alice. Unfortunately, the elements of *power* or *rank* and *threat* figure in the supervisor-teacher relationship more prominently than is tolerable, and Alice's face-threatening acts become detrimental to the conference outcomes. The teacher left this conference motivated to change and with specific ideas about how to change, but at the same time vaguely insulted rather than supported in her desire to reflect on her teaching and sharpen her skills.

Cases #2 and #3. The Strategist and the General. Diana, the strategist, performs face-threatening acts that occur with average frequency and typically are indirect requests and suggestions as opposed to orders or demands. In threatening both positive and negative face, this experienced supervisor tends to be more bald and on-record, with little backing off. She typically uses only positive redress. She seems to be saying "You're O.K., but I will subtly and insistently tell you ways to improve." This allows her teacher to maintain positive face, but it limits her self-determination. Diana is experienced and in

charge, but does not want to be a bully. Distance, power, and threat combine to make this a low-threat conference, and Diana's politeness strategies are coordinately less polite (more bald and less redressed). An interesting element of her approach is her use of loaded questions, which occur twice as frequently as the norm for the case studies. Diana ensures at least verbal commitment to change. Diana asks questions such as, "Can you think of any good ways to check for understanding [other] than to see if they've [just] got the process down?" After offering her own suggestions, Diana asks, "Have you ever tried it that way?" or "Have you done anything like that?"

The nature of FTAs performed by Mary, the general, in her low-risk conference is highly mixed: over 50% are indirect requests and suggestions, and over 25% are demands and orders (the latter being twice the norm). She threatens negative face, or self-determination, eight times more frequently than positive face but frequently redresses with positive politeness, thus assuring the teacher that she is "O.K." The outstanding characteristic of this conference is the baldness, the less polite approach Mary uses. As an experienced supervisor, Mary strives to make the conference appear collegial, but often her words contradict this. She is similar to Alice, in Case #1, in that she seeks to emphasize "we-ness," gives reasons to pursue what she wants, and states the FTA as a general rule all should follow. Mary's speech frequently starts with words like, "I think what you need to look at . . ." "I think if you . . .," "What I want to do is see if we can . . ." More directly, she says, "Have them come in and . . .," and "Have the books out . . ."

Inexperienced Supervisors

In their relatively high-risk conferences, the less experienced supervisors (David, Wilma, Jill, and Craig) performed either an extraordinarily low (4) or high (52) number of FTAs. These supervisors tended to be more indirect (with one exception), and they were more likely to threaten both negative and positive face. They offered both positive and negative redress, given in relatively proportionate ratio to their FTAs. (See Table 2.)

Case #4: The Eager Retreater. David is a beginning supervisor who estimates his conference with a beginning teacher as only moderately risky, since both of them are new to their positions and they have a comfortable social familiarity. He believes a supervisor should actively press for instructional improvement, but because he senses the threat inherent in giving suggestions (threats to both the teacher's positive and negative face), he typically uses a wide variety of redressive, softening speeches:

You really did get it all.
I think that's a really good technique.
It was a little canned, but all the ingredients were there.
I don't feel the kids felt threatened at all.

Although such words seem to make David's approach more gentle, confusion arises because they often *contradict* his analysis of the classroom interaction already discussed!

David's objectives for this conference include (1) the teacher's recognition of the need for more structure and discipline in the classroom and (2) helping the teacher consider ways of providing transfer between topics. The conference is less than successful primarily because of David's approach-avoidance behavior, which compounds his contradictions. In his eagerness to introduce change and improve instruction, David performs many face-threatening acts, most of which (71%) are requests for action. Many of these requests (82%) are made indirectly:

We kind of moved a little fast from mean to median to mode.

Then, some of the kids would have had an opportunity. . .

Was that too much?

Would you have gone through (the other information)?

It was hard for me to see what the transfer was from where you had been mathematically.

In addition, David's more direct requests for action are often followed by concurrent speeches that effectively cancel their intent:

Your expectations on attention by the students need to be higher. (Followed by "I think you're in tune with them" and "I totally agree that you can't put too much on the kids.")

You need more time on the introduction. (Followed by "That might have been just the pressure of wanting to get all of that in.")

There were some things that maybe were disruptive. (Followed by "They maybe were distracted with their own little things.")

As he fumbles to push for improvement while easing threats to the teacher's self-esteem, David neglects altogether the enriching elements of reflection and exploration. This creates a conference wherein the participants seem to be talking past each other. In the end, David's suggestion for more structure fizzles when he finally says, "I *guess* that's my suggestion, but it's a suggestion *maybe* to try . . . maybe next summer." The teacher left this conference with no plan of action for a class seriously in need of change.

Cases #5, #6, and #7: The Reluctant Expert, the Heartless Dictator, and the Gladbander. Wilma, the reluctant expert, is also a beginning supervisor. In her high-risk conference, she uses indirectness and hinting to achieve her aims. Both positive and negative threats to the teacher's face, which occur infrequently (and 43% of which are loaded questions), are redressed with politeness, notably hedging and adding formality. While she is an instructional expert who clearly knows ways to help this teacher improve, Wilma fails to communicate directly and clearly enough to get anywhere. She says, "I'm trying to think if there was a way that could have been avoided. I don't know." She gently questions the room set-up, the teacher's purpose, student

participation, and student retention, but fails to follow through with the teacher.

In the case of Jill, the heartless dictator, over 54% of her very frequent FTAs are demands, orders, or loaded questions. A novice supervisor, she threatens the teacher's positive face baldly and often fails altogether to redress her actions. In this high-risk conference, the effect of Jill's pattern of criticism loaded question-teacher response is an escalation of conflict. Jill opens with, "Do you really feel that they came away learning what you wanted them to learn that day?" Already threatened, the teacher hears Jill announce four times during the ensuing conference, "I'm here to help you improve," after which Jill repeatedly demands follow-up observations to "see if things are better." Self-esteem battered, the teacher refuses to surrender to Jill's demands.

As a postulant (outsider to supervision, in this case, a social services coordinator), Craig, the gladhander, considers this a high-risk conference. Even when the teacher appears willing to discuss change and personal improvement, Craig refuses to interfere with her self-determination or approval. Craig's pronouncements that the teacher "did a real nice job, did a real good job" and that her attempt to reinforce disciplinary standards "wasn't that big a deal" effectively shortstops serious reflection on the class. The result is a conference wherein three of the total of four FTAs are indirect requests that threaten negative face but are appropriately redressed with negative politeness strategies. The observing-conferring process is limited to two pre-determined areas, upon which the teacher reflects but does not plan change, and the teacher pronounces the process "adequate."

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The case study supervisors were inconsistent in how they attempted to protect teachers' face. They performed face-threatening acts with various politeness strategies and substrategies, predictable by the variables of experience and risk.

Low-risk encounters (in terms of the combination of distance, power, and threat) were associated with less politeness and high-risk encounters with more politeness, thus confirming politeness theory. Although this held true for the general risk level of the conference, it is not known if it would hold across contrasting FTAs varying in extremity in a single conference or across conferences.

Beginning supervisors typically enter instructional conferences at a great disadvantage due to *risk* (as defined by distance, power, and threat). Thus, it appears that their strategies to get teachers to do what they want them to do (arguably a typical goal of novice supervisors eager to improve instruction and unschooled in reflective conference strategies) vary considerably from those of experienced supervisors. Because of risk or threat, the novice supervisor may be either (1) much less threatening (low frequency of FTAs), less

direct, and more polite than the more experienced supervisor or (2) far more threatening (high frequency of FTAs), more direct, and less polite than the more experienced supervisor. The result is the *too soft* or *too hard* beginning supervisor.

Achieving one's ends seems more likely with a reasonably direct approach to improvements, as suggested by the behaviors of the experienced supervisors, coupled with a skillful combination of indirect (at first) and direct (later, if needed) verbal acts. At the same time, because experienced supervisors appear to impose more on teacher self-determination but redress these acts with assurances related to approval or self-esteem, and because this is done less politely and in low-risk conferences (the threat of evaluation alone ensures this), one has to wonder about the potential insult inherent in the experienced supervisors' words. Are supervisors reinforcing teaching as a profession or de-professionalizing it? If we are sure that a teacher's attitude determines the amount of behavior change, then the effect of our words on the teacher must be closely examined. Finally, supervisor preparation must begin to encompass these understandings.

Reconstructing Supervisory Practice

Findings indicating problems with face threat and politeness in instructional conferences demonstrate the need to continue related research. Is the need to allow self-determination and approval consistent with the current thrust for teacher reflection? Does the inequity of power and threat issues imply a need for shared critical inquiry? Finally, can the study of discourse contribute to the reconstruction of supervision?

It is this last question that drives discourse and conversation analysis studies. Reaching beyond recent work in analyzing classroom discourse, discourse analysis of instructional conference interaction may become a heuristic for reconstructing or designing supervisory conferences. Such analysis may describe general elements of conference interaction, study patterns, identify situational or cultural factors imposing constraints on conference discourse, and examine features of conference contexts, such as power, conflict, topic changes, turn taking, rituals, and strategy. Findings could be examined in light of current trends (for example, attaining reflection, collegiality, and equality in conference dialogs). It is possible that discourse analysis will ultimately provide keys to individual growth for teachers and communicative competence for supervisors.¹¹

¹¹Jo Roberts, "The Relevance of Discourse Analysis of Supervisory Conferences: An Exploration" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, Athens, GA, November 1990).

Teacher Reflection and Critical Inquiry

Dissatisfied with van Manen's ideas about teacher reflection (which involved Schön's concepts and Habermas's three modes of empirical reasoning—analytic, hermeneutic, and critical), Zeichner and Liston turned to philosophical, rather than theoretical, literature to build a framework for analyzing *practical reasoning* during supervisory conferences.¹² Their final set of categories distinguished among factual, prudential, justificatory, and critical discourse; and they reported dismally low "Reflective Teaching Indexes" (RTIs) during conferences. Less complex modes of reasoning appear to dominate instructional conferences.

In other research, Retallick bemoaned the unequal power relationships of conference participants and suggested discourse study, including participants' learning to reflect on their own language and communication.¹³ Lobbying for an alternative version of clinical supervision, as opposed to the prevalent technocratic approach (with its attendant issues of power), Retallick carefully framed his argument in terms of the principles of the method of critical inquiry. In his study, a critical analysis of discourse through the application of depth hermeneutics, supervisors and teachers engaged in mutual postconference analyses of transcripts of their conference, thus "reflecting on the reflection," with the goal of transformation of their own communication structures. Achieving symmetrical structures of communication or equal dialogue roles for the purpose of critical inquiry, and overcoming the hegemony of technocratic rationality for the purpose of reflection *proved difficult at best*. Smyth's suggestion on this point is for teachers to work together in "assisted self-evaluation," a reciprocal and collegial process wherein *both* parties are willing to have their teaching observed, critiqued, and reconstructed, thus avoiding asymmetrical power relations inherent in the hierarchical arrangement that analyzes the work of only one party.¹⁴

Although he acknowledged Habermas's criterion of free exchange as an essential value in a democratic society and as a powerful principle when applied to criticism of authority's constraints on free discussion, Hymes was nevertheless concerned about discourse encompassing the ideal of free

¹²Max J. van Manen, "Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical," *Curriculum Inquiry* 6 (Fall 1977): 205–228; Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Kenneth M. Zeichner and Dan Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (Spring 1985): 155–173; cf. Daniel P. Gauthier, *Practical Reasoning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

¹³John A. Retallick, "Clinical Supervision and the Structure of Communication" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April 1990).

¹⁴John Smyth, "Problematising Teaching Through a Critical Approach to Clinical Supervision" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April 1990).

exchange, wherein topics or problems are worked through to consensus.¹⁵ Hymes was particularly critical of the conception philosophically, "since it seems to leave behind entirely the fit of words to the world as a criterion of truth, and to substitute consensus, which could easily be a truth by community declaration."¹⁶

Thus, we may be left with the disquieting suspicion that deep reflection is difficult to enact, at best, and that free exchange is potentially tantamount to shared error.

Clearly, improved supervisory practice is an increasingly valuable goal. Its attainment may be hastened by a significant mass of related research, including the following:

- consideration of the developmental aspects of supervisory practice,
- carefully channeled use of the "technology" of discourse analysis and other alternative, nontraditional approaches to the study of supervision,
- observation of supervisory speech and behaviors not typically open to recorders or cameras, thus capturing more of the diversity of supervisory acts, and
- adjudication of extant research focusing on supervisory behavior.

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¹⁵Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence" in *Recent Sociology Number 2* ed H P Dretzel (New York MacMillan, 1970), pp 114- 148, Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translation from German by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), Dell H Hymes, "Ethnolinguistic Study of Classroom Discourse." Final report to The National Institute of Education, April 1982.

¹⁶ibid , p. 83

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