

Learning through the breach

Language socialization among African American cosmetologists

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ABSTRACT ■ In this article, I analyze a series of breaches (Garfinkel, 1967) observed during an 18-month ethnographic study of an African American cosmetology school in South Carolina. Students, clients, teachers (and this author) committed endless verbal and nonverbal mistakes during everyday hair care encounters. They also employed an array of cultural and professional communicative strategies to resolve them. Their candid deliberations over what went wrong or was supposed to happen in client-stylist and stylist-stylist negotiations provide critical insights into the role of language in marking hair care expertise. Their evaluations also underscore the importance of speaker intentionality and accountability, as well as the virtues of forgiveness, within African American women's hair care practices. Moreover, their breach assessments clarify what is at stake in terms of professionalism and clientdom for African American stylists, their predominantly Black female clientele, and a vulnerable constituency of cosmetology students when mistakes are made at the level of language and representation.

KEY WORDS ■ breach, African American, women, language socialization, cosmetology, intentionality, accountability, 'teachable moments'

To err is human. This is a shared truth among ethnographers as we often gain the greatest insights through mistakes we commit and/or observe during our fieldwork endeavors. Garfinkel, one of the foremost teachers in this regard, reminds us that we can commit mistakes of a more nuanced order: breaches. Breaches violate expectations governing social behavior and, in doing so, reveal tacit rules underlying how to behave. Schieffelin (1990) further explains that breaches – disagreements in interpretations of language, instruction, arguments, and so on – may expose the implicit cultural expectations and assumptions underlying a social practice. Breaches thus presume that while it is human to err, humans learn through their missteps which actions are appropriate or inappropriate in specific contexts.

In this article, I analyze a series of breaches observed during an 18-month ethnographic study of an African American-owned cosmetology school in South Carolina I call The Cosmetology Institute (TCI).¹ It was there that I ‘cut my teeth’ as an ethnographer by committing endless linguistic and interpersonal mistakes. These ‘failures in the field,’ as I have sometimes called them (Jacobs-Huey, 2002, 2006), sensitized me to virtues of forgiveness (or lack thereof) and the potential minefield of language within and across African American hair care communities. Specifically, these breach episodes taught me what was at stake for African American stylists, their predominantly Black female clientele, and, arguably, an especially vulnerable constituency of cosmetology students when mistakes were made at the level of language and representation.

My discussion will focus primarily on mistakes committed at the level of word choice, as well as communicative breaches committed by clients and licensed and student stylists during a canonical encounter in the hair care industry – client-stylist negotiations. Several of these breaches are noteworthy since they entail not one, but conceivably multiple breaches. These breach episodes compelled me to ask such questions as: where, specifically, is the breach? What constitutes a verbal and/or non-verbal breach in African American hair care negotiations? What speech styles do Black women use to expose and evaluate communicative breaches? How do these breaches inflect questions of identity, expertise, and authority in terms of who can be an ‘expert’ in salon encounters? Further, how does speaker intentionality and accountability influence the way clients and stylists respond to potential breaches during hair care encounters? Finally, what is at stake for clients, cosmetologists, and students alike as they evaluate alleged breaches?

Since many of these breach episodes occurred at the level of language, I employ discourse analysis to analyze what people said, how they said it, and the interpersonal consequences of their utterances.² I turn my attention now to my own socialization in and through the breach. For it was through

my own experiences that I came to appreciate breaches as ‘teachable moments’ within the cosmetology field.

My earliest breach remains vivid in my mind. As I recounted in recent work (Jacobs-Huey, 2006: 10–11), I wrote an essay early in my fieldwork (Jacobs-Huey, 1996c) describing the dilemmas I faced observing and later writing about Black women’s hair care practices. I shared the essay with my mother, who is a cosmetologist. She immediately took issue with the fact that I had described her and other stylists as ‘hairdressers’ in the Introduction: ‘I am not a hairdresser – I don’t dress the hair. I cultivate the hair!’ she complained. I had committed the ultimate breach: calling my mother out of her name. In doing so, I had also insulted the community of practice to which she and other hairstylists belonged. This wouldn’t be the first time I unwittingly breached the linguistic protocols governing hairstylists’ representations of themselves and their practice.

I also managed to get in trouble over language during my longitudinal study of TCI, the cosmetology school in South Carolina. As is often the case with longitudinal fieldwork, my proclivity for observation encountered the obligatory expectations of my research participants, who thought it best that I both observe and participate in school activities should the need arise. When the school experienced a heavy volume of walk-in clients, I therefore shifted from observer to receptionist. I learned even more about the importance of language among cosmetologists by serving in this capacity.

While assisting a client one afternoon, I asked an instructor, Mrs Collins, the price of a ‘wash-and-set’ and received an unconventional reply. Rather than answer my question, she challenged it: ‘Do you mean *shampoo*? Because you wash dogs, not hair.’ I had received from Mrs Collins yet another lesson in proper language use, only this time before an impressionable audience of clients and students. But there was much more going on in this public shaming than my subsequent loss of face.

Mrs Collins’s correction, much like my mother’s reprimand, intensified my awareness of the potential minefield of language and demonstrated the work of language socialization that I would see time after time across multiple hair care settings. These reproofs also socialized me into proper language use befitting our respective roles as ‘hair expert’ versus ‘hair novice’. My linguistic mishaps were advantageous insofar as they helped me figure out what was particularly at stake for stylists in these interactions.

Language socialization among African American cosmetologists

As I continued my multi-sited study (Jacobs-Huey, 2006), I realized that explicit and implicit language instruction constituted a central means through which stylists socialized hair care apprentices (and novices like me)

to recognize their identities as established stylists or hair experts-in-the-making. Lexicon, in particular, proved to be a recurring focus of socialization efforts at the cosmetology school and hair care seminars I observed – for good reason. *Talk about talk*, or metacommunication, constitutes a more explicit example of how newcomers are socialized *through* and *to* professional language (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). In various communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff and Lave, 2002), newcomers learn that the process of becoming and being an expert relies, in large part, on their display of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), or the ability to produce talk that is highly valued in their field (Bourdieu, 1991). The use of registers (Ferguson, 1964, 1977) and specialized lexicon (Drew, 1992) in a broader context confers practitioners and their communities of practice with legitimacy and authority (Bourdieu, 1977); such language enables individuals to construct expert identities and corresponding hierarchical power relations when interacting with novices or lay persons (Foucault, 1980, 1988). Notable examples can be found in the fields of medicine (Todd and Fisher, 1993), law (Mertz 1992), social science (Jacoby, 1998; Ochs and Jacoby, 1995), and other disciplines (Meehan, 1981; Jordan, 1989; Waitzkin, 1985).

Professional language use is also a central means through which students mark their membership and competency in the field of cosmetology.³ At TCI, students learned how to speak and be silent in the manner of professional hair stylists through explicit and implicit forms of metacommunication (Jacobs-Huey, 2003). More explicit forms include literacy activities and instruction provided in mainstream cosmetology textbooks. The students' basic text, *Milady's Standard Textbook of Cosmetology*, provides 'scripts' (Hatch, 1992; Schank and Abelson, 1977) or blueprints delineating a range of effective communication strategies for use in their service-related encounters. For example, students learned professional verbal and nonverbal skills through scripted techniques for how to create favorable face-to-face impressions with clients. These scripts also provided instruction on how to handle clients' complaints over the telephone. Through their engagement in such literacy activities, students and instructors learned to co-construct (Duranti, 1997; Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Jacoby and Gonzales, 1991) their identities as hair care professionals and hone communicative strategies that were useful in more applied settings (e.g. client-stylist negotiations).

Language socialization also took place outside of the classroom, particularly in 'floorwork' with clients where the stakes around representation were high for both African American stylists and their predominantly Black female clientele. For many African American women, hair is 'not just hair', but a highly symbolic marker of cultural, professional, political, and gendered identities (Banks, 2000; Bonner, 1991; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Rooks, 1996). For stylists, hair is a medium for their artistic expression and

economic viability. Client-stylist negotiations must therefore mediate clients' economic investment and aesthetic preferences and stylists' creative agency, expertise, and ability to advertise their skills as cosmetologists (Gimlin, 1996; Jacobs-Huey, 1996a, 1996b, 2006).

My analyses of breach episodes provided the greatest insights into what was at stake in many hair care negotiations involving African American women. As I witnessed breaches being committed again and again by clients, students, stylists, and myself, I realized that these communicative episodes implicated us all in 'teachable moments' wherein we learned valuable lessons about the 'right' way to talk and be as clients and stylists.

Breaches in client-stylist negotiations

For the stylists and especially the students I followed in South Carolina, *breaches* (Garfinkel, 1967) or, alternatively, 'breaks in frames' (Goffman, 1981) occurred when clients or stylists would act out of line or in other ways contest or subvert their respective role expectations as hair novices and hair experts.⁴ A breach on the part of them could involve asking too many questions (Jacobs-Huey, 1996a) or actively monitoring the progression of their hairstyle (e.g. turning body to see the mirror) before their stylist had completed their work. Such verbal and nonverbal conduct belied the client's presumed role as service recipient and situated her/him as an active co-participant. While this, no doubt, is a ubiquitous feature of all dialogue in the sense that the audience *co-authors* or collaboratively constructs and interprets a speaker's utterance (Duranti, 1997; Duranti and Brenneis, 1986), clients' explicit enactment of their participatory status was not always desired by their stylist.

Clients, though, were not the only group capable of breaching the implicit interactional 'scripts' (see also Schank and Abelson, 1977) governing client-stylist interactions. Stylists, too, would inadvertently violate such scripts by publicly and indirectly criticizing their colleagues' work. For student stylists, such remarks were explicitly problematized since they served to jeopardize their already marginal status as cosmetologists-in-training. Explicitly marking stylists (and sometimes clients) as responsible for particular breaches also implies that they are, to some extent, expected to share knowledge about appropriate roles and sometimes even specialized terms relevant to hair care practice.

Clients' verbal errors during hair care interactions

Stylists sometimes treated clients' lexical mistakes during hair care encounters as mere errors and, at other times, symbolically-laden breaches. In each

case, stylists were able to educate clients in ‘proper’ language use. For example, when clients used lay hair terminology to describe their desired hair treatments, student stylists and instructors would often invoke the preferred term by means of a question. In doing so, they demonstrated their specialized lexical knowledge and, at the same time, socialized clients to make appropriate word choices in the future. Transcript 1 illustrates a hair care negotiation at TCI featuring a conversational exchange of this sort:

Transcript 1: Stylist-Initiated Word Correction⁵

- 1 Client: Hi.
- 2 Mrs Collins: Hi. May I help you?
- 3 Client: I want to get something for this bad hair day heh heh.
- 4 Mrs Collins: hh what are you gonna get?
- 5 Client: A perm.
- 6 Mrs Collins: A *relaxer*?
- 7 Client: A relaxer.
- 8 Mrs Collins: Okay, that will be \$20.00.
- 9 ((Client gives Mrs Collins \$20 and then awaits service))

In the interaction above, a client learns (as I once did) that ‘relaxer,’ not ‘perm,’ is the proper designation for her desired style. A perm describes the chemical process often applied to European hair textures which entails chemically straightening and then rolling the hair on rods to produce a semi-permanent curl pattern. When this procedure is applied to Black, naturally curly hair textures, it is commonly referred to as a ‘jherri curl’ or ‘curl.’ Alternatively, a relaxer is a chemical treatment designed to straighten naturally curly hair textures. Another reason why this distinction is important is because clients cannot easily switch between these two styles (i.e. a relaxer and a perm/curl) without first cutting off formerly chemically processed hair. Mrs Collins is able to distinguish the client’s professed desire from her actual motive by using and rhetorically displaying both her professional knowledge of hair terminology and her observation of the client’s existing hairstyle.

Let us consider how Mrs Collins executes this correction. After the client half-heartedly complains about the current condition of her hair and expresses her intent to remedy it, Mrs Collins initiates a question-answer sequence that is typical of many hair care negotiations. In line 4, she explicitly asks the client to specify her intended hair service. The client’s response, while concise and direct, nevertheless evokes a lexical repair from Mrs Collins. Specifically, Mrs Collins marks the client’s response as somehow inappropriate through the structure and intonation of her utterance. Specifically, she borrows the structure of the client’s preceding comment while adding a new term (i.e. a *relaxer*?). Her emphasis on the term relaxer,

coupled with her rising intonation, mark her comment as a question and, more specifically, a correction.

The client displays her acknowledgment of Mrs Collins's correction by reiterating the word 'relaxer' in line 7. In doing so, she repeats Mrs Collins's words in a manner that is devoid of a rising intonational contour, demonstrating an acceptance of Mrs Collins's repair. This episode then proceeds towards closure, as marked by the exchange of money. Another way of representing what happened in this brief interaction is depicted in Transcript 2 (note bolded comments).

Transcript 2: Stylist-Initiated Word Correction

- 1 Client: Hi.
 2 Mrs Collins: Hi. May I help you?
 3 Client: I want to get something for this bad hair day heh heh.
 4 Mrs Collins: hh what are you gonna get? **Mrs Collins's rising intonation marks her reply as a question; an explicit repair**
 5 Client: A perm.
 6 Mrs Collins: A *relaxer*?
 7 Client: A relaxer. **Only when client provides 'right' answer is her request legitimized before all**
 8 Mrs Collins: Okay, that will be \$20.00.
 9 ((*Client gives Mrs Collins \$20 and then awaits service*))

This interaction exemplifies how corrections that emerge from ruptures in institutional scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977; see also Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) reflect tacit beliefs about 'proper' language use in professional settings. Such corrections also socialize the recipients of talk into 'proper' verbal behavior.

Clients' nonverbal breaches during hair care interactions

The preceding exchange highlights how stylists framed clients' improper word choices as errors and opportunities for lessons in proper language use. I also observed nonverbal mistakes by clients which were constructed as a breach, and corroborated as such by other stylists (and sometimes even other clients). For example, I witnessed student stylists commiserate about 'difficult' clients who attempted to position themselves in front of the mirror against their (stylists') subtle direction. Deirdre, an outspoken senior-level student, likewise remarked of a client one day, 'She steady struggling to see [the mirror]. I turn her chair this way, she turning against me.' By insisting on monitoring her hairstyle-in-progress, this client was perceived to be violating expectations governing the proper bodily comportment of the

school's patrons (see also Lebaron and Jones, 2002). The implicit lesson of Deirdre's critique (which other students affirmed) was that clients should not turn their chairs towards the mirror in order to check the progress of their styles until their hairstyle is complete. Such behavior accentuates clients' status as hair care recipients and paying customers, but risks subverting students' status as service providers.

Perhaps the most striking instance of a nonverbal breach that I observed took place when a client, who was getting her hair done by a student stylist named Lynn, picked up the student's curling iron and proceeded to curl her own hair! Her actions alarmed Lynn and a few other clients; in fact, several of them commented on the client's brazen behavior after she left the salon. One of these clients told Lynn, 'You have to be patient, huh?', to which Lynn responded, 'Yeah, I have to be in my profession.' The client then explicitly problematized the offending client's error by noting, 'Yeah, I do too ... *but that client tried to curl her hair with your curler!*' Lynn countered, 'Yeah, but I took it away from her.'

Their public evaluation of the client's alleged breach caused me to reflect on what had, in fact, happened. From my perspective (as immediately recorded in my ethnographic notes at the time), the client actually relinquished the styling implement, but only after recognizing my and other clients' stares of incredulity. (Here, I must acknowledge that while I was a frequent recipient of lessons in 'proper' language use, I was also wittingly and unwittingly complicit in other instances of language socialization.) The client also marked her awareness of the breach through a self-deprecating laugh prior to surrendering Lynn's curling iron and also by providing Lynn with a generous tip. These theories and concessions aside, a few things remain clear from the point of view of Lynn and other empathetic clients. By picking up Lynn's (the student) hairstyling implement, the client boldly infringed upon her personal property and personal territory (see Goffman, 1971), as well as Lynn's professional face (Goffman, 1967) as an expert stylist.

Stylist verbal breaches during hair care interactions

Another incident at TCI sensitized me to the implicit language rules shared by student stylists concerning both what to say and what *not* to say in front of clients. Once, while Lynn used a hot curling iron to style her client's hair, Deirdre asked aloud, 'What's that? I smell hair burning.' Aware that Deirdre's observation could have caused the client to become concerned that it was *her* hair that was burning, Lynn immediately showed her client the curling iron. After the client departed, Lynn publicly reprimanded Deirdre, who then conceded her error (through an apology) and explained that she meant no harm. Deirdre's admission illuminates the centrality of speaker intentionality and accountability in students' evaluation and resolution of

various breach episodes. Questions of intentionality (e.g. whether a speaker meant to offend or willingly breach certain protocols governing client-stylist communication) and accountability (e.g. whether speakers take responsibility for witting or unwitting slips of the tongue) were particularly important at the school since African American female clients and stylists frequently employed *indirectness* and more direct strategies such as *reading* to reprimand people who were felt to be acting inappropriately (see Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Mitchell-Kernan, 1971, 1972, 1973; Morgan, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998). Speakers who used *indirectness* often obscured the surface content of an utterance through ‘veiled’ remarks, whereas speakers who engaged in *reading* denigrated other speakers in a direct and public manner in order to redress perceived slights (Morgan, 1994, 1998).

Such dynamics were underscored in an interaction between Deirdre and Mrs Collins on a separate occasion. Deirdre had just spent an inordinate amount of time adding hair additions (often called ‘tracks’) to a client’s hair. During the hairstyling process, Deirdre’s client suggested that she might need more tracks than the amount Deirdre recommended. The client also mentioned the possibility of adding them herself at home. Deirdre responded somewhat snippily that the existing number of hair additions was, in fact, appropriate and then applied finishing touches to the client’s hair. (I learned later that the client’s recommendation, and especially her latter comment about doing her own hair at home, was problematic to Deirdre on multiple levels; after the client departed, she noted, ‘I was gonna *read* her for that!’)

The client’s verbal breach was followed by another incriminating comment by a relatively powerful source. As Deirdre finalized the client’s hairstyle, Mrs Collins, a TCI instructor, confirmed the client’s request for an additional track. Mrs Collins first complimented Deirdre by saying, ‘That looks good.’ Then she told the client, ‘Yeah, I can see how you could have used another track.’ The client beamed in response and agreed with Mrs Collins’s assessment: ‘Yeah, that’s what I think. I can have my daughter put them in.’ The instructor’s endorsement of the client’s request (which was at odds with Deirdre’s professional hairstyle recommendation), coupled with the client’s public confirmation, constituted an assault to Deirdre’s professional face as a hair expert – not once, but twice!

Drama ensued. Never one to spare her words, Deirdre’s response threw back the curtain on professional conventions governing stylists’ front-stage talk with clients and stylists’ back-stage talk among stylists (Goffman, 1959). ‘Mrs Collins’, she barked, ‘>I was *THROUGH* with her and you had to open your *darn* mouth!< ((*Then to client*)) Your hair is fine! If you put those tracks in, your hair will look *FAKE!*’ Deirdre’s client tried to reassure her that everything was ‘fine’ but, by this time, it was too late. Deirdre was not done with her tirade. She told the client, ‘And Mrs Collins thinks you should put the tracks up *here*, not down here! Mrs Collins will handle you now.’

Multiple breaches are discernable in this heated exchange. The client may have perceived Deirdre's refusal to oblige her request for additional tracks as a breach of the good-business principle, 'The client is always right.' In Deirdre's mind, the breaches encompassed the client's recommendation for additional tracks, as well as her comments about adding her own tracks at home. Mrs Collins's public endorsement of the client's request represented the third and final breach; indeed the final straw that compelled Deirdre to deem the client Mrs Collins's responsibility. Notice that Deirdre's angry response shores up her expertise by delineating the specialized hairstyling knowledge she shares with Mrs Collins; she tells her client, 'And Mrs Collins thinks you should put the tracks up *here*, not down there!'

Deirdre's comments contain several prosodic and interactional features that are associated with a highly directed, African American verbal genre known as *reading*. As Morgan (1998) notes, a read occurs whenever a person denigrates another to his or her face in an unsubtle or unambiguous manner. She adds that targets are often read or verbally attacked for acting out race, class, or other status-related privileges. In the aforementioned sequence, Deirdre employs prosodic features associated with reading, including loud-talking and high pitch, to assert her own professional voice and right to speak. More specifically, she publicly denigrates both the client and the stylist for contradicting her recommendation and, thus, challenging her expertise as a stylist.

As noted earlier, issues of accountability and intentionality were ever central to clients' and stylists' resolution of this and other breaches. So, too, were questions of forgiveness. Shortly after the incident occurred, Deirdre asked Mrs Collins to explain why she had made those comments. Mrs Collins acknowledged her error by laughing and saying, 'I know what you mean Deirdre.' Deirdre, however, was not satisfied with Mrs Collins's concession, perhaps because Mrs Collins's remarks were empathetic rather than apologetic. Deirdre then polled several clients who had witnessed the interaction and all of them agreed that Mrs Collins's statement was, in their minds, inappropriate. In short, Deirdre refused to forgive Mrs Collins. This failure to pardon was indicated when Deirdre publicly shamed Mrs Collins by compelling her, *vis-à-vis* observant and vocal clients, to recognize the powerful implications of her (Mrs Collins's) positionality and public evaluations as an instructor and licensed stylist. Deirdre's socialization represents a reversal of roles insofar as she, the student, teaches Mrs Collins, the instructor, a valuable lesson. Moreover, the manner in which she executes this lesson implicates not only the targeted pupil (in this case Mrs Collins and, arguably, the client), but also other observant clients, who are all made complicit in the very process of teaching others what *not* to say during a client-stylist negotiation.

The case of multiple breaches: part I

This, however, was not the first nor the last episode where students either exposed or committed breaches themselves that posed risks to other stylists' professional face as cosmetologists. Nor was it the last time that students drew upon a number of cultural and professional speech styles to transform breach episodes into teachable moments. The last breach I shall discuss involved Mrs Collins, a disgruntled client, and Deirdre. It occurred when the client spoke angrily to Mrs Collins about the outcome of a recent salon visit. During this public and heated exchange, Deirdre grew angry and began to critique the client indirectly. Because Deirdre was an unratified participant (Goffman, 1964) in Mrs Collins's conversation with her client, their formerly dyadic conversation (involving stylist and client) evolved into a triadic feud involving Deirdre. Further, their discussion created a need to resolve not one but multiple breaches.

Deirdre's intrusion enacts a breach that is, in some sense, similar to the one Mrs Collins committed when she aligned with Deirdre's client (who requested additional tracks). In that case and the one I shall now discuss, the client, Mrs Collins, and Deirdre are (again) implicated in the violation of various communicative scripts concerning *client-stylist* and *student-instructor* service-related encounters.

My account of this event was recorded in ethnographic notes on the same day their exchange occurred. My description and, more poignantly, the breach-related questions they provoked, were also discussed at length during an advanced 'theory' class. A record of the senior class's discussion of this interaction, depicted sequentially in Transcripts 3–5, thus affords a more intersubjective analysis of the verbal stances and implicit beliefs enacted by speakers to describe what went wrong or, alternatively, what should have happened that day.

The catalyst for the case of multiple breaches

Here, now, is an excerpt from my ethnographic notes describing the initial interaction between Mrs Collins, her client, and (later) Deirdre:

... A client came in today who seemed upset about her hair cut. I was sitting at the receptionist table, but she walked right past me to Mrs Collins, who was shampooing another client's hair. The disgruntled client inquired as to why her trim was a cut. IN ALL HER 46 years of tending to her hair, she had not had her hair cut so much. Mrs Collins did a lot of face-work, eye work, a lot of sincere work. She apologized, said she didn't cut it, only trimmed it. She repeated that a lot actually. 'I swear I didn't cut your hair mam. I didn't know you were so sensitive. See, I did a uniform cut which makes the back look shorter. I did a cut from zero elevation and those other

stylists you're talking about did it differently. If I had a known you were so sensitive about it, I wouldn't have, but it would keep breaking.' Her comments had all the essential ingredients espoused in the cosmetology textbook and by teachers: she expressed empathy with the client, employed the professional language of cosmetology, and made additional efforts to distinguish lay skill from expert skill by implying that the client was over-sensitive about her hair length. Mrs Collins also assured the client that she didn't look bad and succeeded in calming her down. Throughout Mrs Collins's speech, the client would laugh ... a nervous uncomfortable laugh. The client's approach, though, apparently offended Deirdre who indirectly began to signify on the inappropriateness of the client's complaint: '... Acting like she the stylist ... No she *didn't* ... Her hair was damaged to begin with!' The client recognized that she was the intended target of Deirdre's comments and finally told Deirdre not to talk to her. 'I ain't talking to you,' Deirdre retorted. 'You *are* talking at me ... Just Don't Do It!,' the client responded. The atmosphere in the school grew tense. My stomach knotted as I felt that things could easily escalate towards chaos. Mrs Collins told Deirdre, 'Deirdre just be quiet.' And while I thought that Mrs Collins's admonition was going to turn things out, it actually served as a way for Deirdre to momentarily deflect her anger from the client to Mrs Collins. When the client finally left, Deirdre continued her tirade ... and she and Tamika speculated as to why Mrs Collins would be so nice to the client. They attributed it to her lack of loyalty to them as fellow, albeit student, stylists and, in fact, likened Mrs Collins to an Uncle Tom. (26 March 1998)

I am still grateful that I wrote this description. Little did I know that, subsequent evaluations of this event just over three weeks later would deepen my appreciation for language as a marker of expertise among stylists. These evaluations would also clarify a number of opposing concerns (and breaches) at play in this exchange. For example, the client was concerned that her prior request for a trim had actually resulted in a cut and articulated this to Mrs Collins. The client's distinction between terminology that is commonly used in cosmetology (e.g. 'trim' versus 'cut'), along with a reference to her 46-year record of personal hair care service, served to construct her identity as a co-expert with regard to the status of her hair. In her capacity as both the client's stylist and the 'floor' manager, Mrs Collins faced the dual challenge of alleviating the client's concerns and maintaining a professional atmosphere within the school. To do so, she had to preserve her own face as a professional stylist, even while the client's public complaint threatened to subvert it. She also had to respect the client's social face as a customer who should, in a business sense, 'always [be] right,' except on such technical matters as what type of 'trim' will best promote the health and growth of her hair. (In this sense, her needs are much like

Deirdre's engagement with the client who requested additional tracks insofar as she, like Deirdre, must resolve conflicting perspectives between herself and her client without compromising her professional expertise and hair knowledge regarding what constitutes a proper 'trim'.)

As Mrs Collins and her client performed the necessary face-work (Goffman, 1967) to preserve their respective expertise and needs, they did so before an attentive audience. This audience included the clients and stylists located near the shampoo area – a very personal area to which clients are invited (but to which this disgruntled client approached without an explicit invitation). The audience also included student stylists who were working near the reception desk. There were, thus, multiple 'bystanders' (Goffman, 1981: 32) who witnessed Mrs Collins's animated attempts to calm the client and diplomatically re-establish the communicative standards to which she, clients, and students are to presumably abide.

Deirdre, who was a present yet unratified participant (Goffman, 1964) in the discussion, exposed additional issues at stake in this interaction. By indirectly marking the perceived inappropriateness of the client's verbal and nonverbal behavior, Deirdre insinuated that the client's manner of complaint undermined the professional face of not only Mrs Collins but also stylists more generally. Her loud objection, 'Acting like she the stylist ... No she *didn't!*', served to indirectly problematize the client's behavior as an unsuitable comportment for clients. More specifically, Deirdre made use of a form of indirectness known as *signifying* in African American communities. Morgan (1998) identifies a specific form of *signifying* known as *pointed indirectness* that is especially pertinent to this exchange. As Morgan (p. 406) notes, 'Pointed indirectness occurs when a speaker ostensibly says something to someone (mock receiver) that is intended for – and to be heard by – someone else and is so recognized.' Accordingly, while Deirdre addressed her comments to another student named Tamika (the mock receiver [see Transcript 3]), her loud pitch and sarcastic tone suggested that her remarks were intended for the disgruntled client and others in the school. Tensions escalated because the client, also an African American woman, displayed her own fluency in *pointed indirectness* and recognized herself as the *intended target* (Morgan, 1998) of Deirdre's remarks, as did Mrs Collins.

Deirdre's interjection clearly troubled the client who exposed and critiqued Deirdre's indirect critique, which Deirdre then disavowed. Deirdre's interjection was also deemed problematic by Mrs Collins, who attempted to silence her. While Deirdre's construction of the client's behavior as a breach potentially worked to defend the clout of stylists everywhere (including her instructor's), her critique also served to disrupt Mrs Collins's immediate face-work with the client. This may be one reason why Mrs Collins asked her to be quiet. Ultimately, however, Mrs Collins's failure

to align with Deirdre was viewed by Deirdre as a stance of disloyalty – indeed, a breach of a shared standard of considerateness among cosmetologists to willingly protect the feelings and face of other stylists whose professional status is subject to attack (see Goffman, 1967). Mrs Collins's command to Deirdre to 'just be quiet' constituted the utmost breach of faith to Deirdre and her peer, Tamika, who felt that Mrs Collins should have sided with them as their instructor and a fellow stylist. They became so disgruntled that they likened Mrs Collins to a highly stigmatized symbol of White accommodation and race betrayal in African American culture (i.e. 'Uncle Tom'; see Bogle, 2001; Carroll, 2006).

Where's the breach?

As highlighted in my ethnographic notes (below), several potential breaches are discernable in the prior exchange between Deirdre, Mrs Collins, and the disgruntled client:

... A client came in today who seemed upset about her hair cut. I was sitting at the receptionist table, but she walked right past me to Mrs Collins [**Breach # 1: client boldly bypasses client area to work area, without consent of receptionist**], who was shampooing another client's hair [**Breach # 2: client interrupts the stylist as she shampoos another client's hair, an act that undermines the stylist's authority and disrupts another client's shampoo experience**]. The disgruntled client inquired as to why her trim was a cut. IN ALL HER 46 years of tending to her hair, she had not had her hair cut so much. [**Breach # 3: the client's bold remarks disrupt the implicit assumption of the hair stylist as expert and legitimates the client herself as a co-expert with respect to her own hair and past hair care service.**] Mrs Collins did a lot of face-work, eye work, a lot of sincere work. She apologized, said she didn't cut it, only trimmed it. She repeated that a lot actually. 'I swear I didn't cut your hair mam. I didn't know you were so sensitive. See, I did a uniform cut which makes the back look shorter. I did a cut from zero elevation and those other stylists you're talking about did it differently. If I had a known you were so sensitive about it, I wouldn't have, but it would keep breaking.' Her comments had all the essential ingredients espoused in the cosmetology textbook and by teachers: She expressed empathy with the client, employed the professional language of cosmetology, and made additional efforts to distinguish lay skill from expert skill by implying that the client was over-sensitive about her hair length. Mrs Collins also assured the client that she didn't look bad and succeeded in calming her down. Throughout Mrs Collins's speech, the client would laugh ... a nervous uncomfortable laugh. The client's approach, though, apparently offended Deirdre who indirectly began to signify on the inappropriateness of the client's complaint: '...

Acting like she the stylist ... No she *didn't* ... Her hair was damaged to begin with!' [Breach # 4: Deirdre uses indirectness to critique the client's inappropriate behavior; in doing so, she violates the dyadic nature of client-stylist negotiations.] The client recognized that she was the intended target of Deirdre's comments and finally told Deirdre not to talk to her. 'I ain't talking to you,' Deirdre retorted. 'You *are* talking at me' ... 'Just Don't Do It!,' the client responded. The atmosphere in the school grew tense. My stomach knotted as I felt that things could easily escalate towards chaos. Mrs Collins told Deirdre, 'Deirdre just be quiet.' [Breach # 5: Mrs Collins's attempt to silence Deirdre is viewed as a stance of disloyalty by Deirdre, a student and fellow stylist.] And while I thought that Mrs Collins's admonition was going to turn things out, it actually served as a way for Deirdre to momentarily deflect her anger from the client to Mrs Collins. When the client finally left, Deirdre continued her tirade ... and she and Tamika speculated as to why Mrs Collins would be so nice to the client. They attributed it to her lack of loyalty to them as fellow, albeit student, stylists and, in fact, likened Mrs Collins to an Uncle Tom. (26 March 1998)

Exposing the breach(es)

Apart from identifying the potential breaches committed in this encounter, I was interested in how the participants involved in this exchange made sense of the conflict. In particular, I was curious about Mrs Collins's and Deirdre's perceptions of a) what counted as the communicative breach and b) who was responsible for the breach (e.g. client, student, teacher) in the conflict. As noted earlier, these questions became the focus of a subsequent lesson in the senior class concerning 'Salon Management,' excerpts of which are depicted in Transcripts 3–5. The senior class discussion of what took place, and more specifically, what was *supposed* to have taken place reveals conflicting understandings of the communicative roles expected of clients, students, and cosmetology instructors. Most importantly, they address when and where the breach happened in the triadic feud and also which person(s) they felt were responsible for it. Deirdre once again deploys indirectness – as does Mrs Collins – to revisit past wrongs and enact lessons in proper communication. Transcript 3 presents the catalyst for this insightful debate.

Transcript 3: Review of Salon Management Worksheet (21 April 1998)

- 1 Mrs Collins: 'Business operation. The owner or manager must have a business sense knowledge, ability, good judgment and ...
- 2 Deirdre: (skill?)
- 3 Mrs Collins: Mm kay. 'Smooth salon management depends on sufficient investment capital,' meaning money. 'Efficiency
- 4

- 5 of management,' be able to come to work on time, keep
 6 your i- keep your salon open the hours that you have
 7 posted on your board, that's what that means. Good
 8 business procedures. Meaning, you you once you set up
 9 your business procedures, you don't want to break it
 10 because people are gonna depend on that. If you say
 11 you're open from nine until five-thirty, be open from nine
 12 to five-thirty. If you say you gonna be in your salon, be
 13 there at nine.
- 14 Deirdre: Not the way we do here though heh heh
- 15 Mrs Collins: I don't think ya'll will stay open long if you come in like
 16 ya'll come in. I mean, if you supposed to be here at eight
 17 thirty, be here at eight thirty. IF you schedule a client to
 18 be for nine fifteen, you need to be in your salon no later
 19 than eight thirty to get ready for your client at nine fifteen.
 20 So you make sure you have everything ready that you need
 21 to do. "Cooperation between management and employee
 22 is a *must*." **That means no cursing or fussing over the**
 23 **clients and uh no no no no kind of bad business whats**
 24 **ever.** IF you have something to say or you don't like
 25 anything, you need to take it in the backroom or just wait
 26 until the client leaves and then discuss it. But *never* discuss
 27 that kind of stuff around your client because you're gonna
 28 lose them. You gotta remember ...
- 29 Deirdre: – That's when you get in your own salon. Not here at the
 30 school
- 31 Mrs Collins: That's everywhere
- 32 Deirdre: *((sucks teeth))* Mrs Collins, please
- 33 Mrs Collins: – That's *all* businesses – It don't have anything to do with
 34 hair. It's ...
- 35 Deirdre: – These people that come in this school here degrade us
 36 as if we are nothing and we have to do their hair for the
 37 little amount that we do. We don't *have* to do their hair.
 38 And if they when they come to this school, they know
 39 they're coming here to students so that should be known
 40 to them, it has to be said to them. They need to be told,
 41 "These are students. Do not *expect* a professional cosme-
 42 tologist who has been in the business for *ten* years to do
 43 your hair the way they s:: to have your hair done. You
 44 need to go to that cosmetologist whose been doing hair
 45 for over ten years.
- 46 Mrs Collins: Some of them some of them do have sometimes you do
 47 have to um remind them um =

- 48 Deirdre: the majority of them that comes in here
 49 Mrs Collins: = that it is a school

Mrs Collins's facilitative review of the worksheet exposes a series of underlying tensions between students, clients, and TCI faculty at the time. As with most American cosmetology schools, clients paid discount prices for hair service by students and all proceeds, with the exception of tips, went to the school. However, TCI was plagued by fiscal challenges. As such, freshman and senior students' bi-weekly morning classes were sometimes cut short to accommodate a rush of clients in the afternoon. These and other realities nurtured a climate of discontent that manifested itself in various ways.

School management complained that students were excessively tardy and sometimes refused to accommodate clients who requested time-consuming hair care procedures such as jherri curls. In turn, some students alleged that they were being exploited as non-paid and over-worked student stylists. Several students also felt that their in-class instruction was being compromised by the management's disproportionate concern about their engagement in 'floorwork' with (paying) clients. Students were further insulted that instructors would occasionally oblige customers' requests for licensed stylists, as opposed to student stylists, thus limiting students' opportunities to gain hair care experience and monetary tips. (Before being serviced, clients had to sign a sheet specifying their name and hair care request. In my frequent capacity as receptionist, I know that clients often used this occasion to discretely request senior students and sometimes instructors as their hairstylists.)

These background tensions come to the fore in the preceding transcript as Mrs Collins attempts to educate senior students on 'salon management.' When she underscores the importance of punctuality among stylists and salon owners in lines 5–13, Deirdre interrupts her and proffers a wry rebuttal to Mrs Collins's lesson. Deirdre's comments in line 14 refute the generalizability of Mrs Collins's claims and insinuate that Mrs Collins's exhortations do not apply to what is going on at the school.

Mrs Collins does not respond directly to Deirdre's innuendo but, rather, makes an explicit connection between her prior remarks and the projected fate of the students assembled. She states, 'I don't think ya'll will stay open long if you come in like ya'll come in . . .' (lines 15–16). Given the prevailing tensions at the school at the time, it is likely that Mrs Collins's prediction may constitute, and be similarly interpreted by others as, a complaint. In her ensuing elaboration of the worksheet answers, Mrs Collins remarks, '... That means no *cursing* or *fussing* [arguing] *over the clients* and uh no no no no kind of bad business whatsoever' (lines 22–24). At the time, I wondered if her stress on particular verbal breaches (i.e. *cursing* or *fussing*

over the clients) was in fact a thinly veiled critique of Deirdre's unsolicited participation in the episode described in my ethnographic notes (26 March 1998). Other class participants' status as silent bystanders and Deirdre's unitary protests in this and subsequent sequences also suggest that they, along with Deirdre, suspect that Deirdre may be the intended target of Mrs Collins's indirect remarks. (It bears noting that I was not alone in speculating whether Deirdre's prior shaming of Mrs Collins could have motivated Mrs Collins to target Deirdre for a retroactive reproof, albeit indirectly, through this lesson.)

Deirdre expands her rebuttal in lines 29–30 and 32 and is refuted once again by Mrs Collins. Both women intensify their (largely dyadic) attempt to identify the breach and hold each other accountable. In lines 35–45, Deirdre's rebuttal shifts to outright critique as she rehashes many of the sentiments she initially expressed during the episode involving Mrs Collins and the angry client. In particular, she lodges a series of complaints against clients who expect polished work from students for a meager price and asserts that clients need to be reminded that they are being serviced by apprentices. (Mrs Collins ratifies the latter perspective with regard to *some* clients.) Deirdre also asserts another gripe shared by many students concerning clients who request instructors (and not students) for certain hair care procedures.

In Transcript 4, Deirdre continues her critique by indicting certain managerial practices at the school that she felt fostered clients' inappropriate expectations and conduct. In particular, Deirdre blames clients' inappropriate behavior on clients themselves, as well as instructors who fail to protect the feelings and perceptions of student cosmetologists. Significantly, the validity of her complaints is worked out in relation to an evaluation of Mrs Collins's handling of both the client's and Deirdre's (subsequent) complaints three weeks prior (note Deirdre's bolded remarks in lines 60–61).

Transcript 4: Exposing and Evaluating Breach Episodes

- 50 Deirdre: – AND you know why they do that? Because they can't
 51 go into nobody's salon with that mess. And nobody's
 52 Mrs Collins: going to come in here and ask for a fingerwave and know
 53 they don't have a relaxer. <I mean go into a salon and ask
 54 for a fingerwave and know they don't have a relaxer
 55 because *that's a professional place*. And that's what it's
 56 and it has to be known. They have to be known that this
 57 is – we're trying to *be* professional in here. They come in
 58 here and they don't have a relaxer. They want a um finge
 59 wave, and then it don't come out right and they get crazy.
 60 **Like that lady come in here with that jherri curl and you**
 61 **cut her hair?** That was ridiculous how she acted! That's

- 105 us to do her hair? You do that all that time and that's not
 106 right. . . You are a professional. You have been a cosm
 107 tologist for for years and she you should not have done
 108 her hair. She should have went – came to a student. . . She
 109 should not even came in here and requested you (.)
 110 *PERio:d*. . . You should've took her in the office. Every
 111 time people come in here, they come in this school and
 112 they insult us as students. And we are students. They sign
 113 the paper, they come in here, they can't assume, some
 114 people are – in here – are good and can do professional
 115 work you know what I'm saying. Some people are good
 116 at some of the things they do
 117 Mrs Collins: Yeah
 118 Deirdre: But students can't you can't expect those people that come
 119 off the street, that ain't gonna pay but eight dollars for a
 120 style anyway and
 121 [ten dollars for a style
 122 Mrs Collins: [I know

Where's the breach?

Deirdre's critique also indicts clients who are disregarding of students' attempts to 'be professional.' In particular, she blames them for placing unreasonable demands on students in cosmetology school and cites, as an example, clients who do not have relaxers, yet request a style (i.e. finger-waves) for which straight or straightened hair is a prerequisite (see Figure 1). Deirdre presumes clients' knowledge of what hair textures are required to produce certain hairstyles and constructs them as culpable for unreasonable hair care requests. To underscore her point, Deirdre invokes the recent interaction between Mrs Collins and the disgruntled client. In lines 60–63, she shifts from general to highly directed discourse by stating, '**Like that lady come in here with that jherri curl and you cut her hair?** That was ridiculous how she acted! That's why I said what I said to her because she talking like she *all of that*. Why didn't she go to a professional salon? . . .?' Deirdre's revelation may mark her awareness of Mrs Collins's use of indirectness to expose the unprofessional nature of her intrusion during this encounter. In divulging the motives behind her own comments, though, Deirdre also (and perhaps inadvertently) outs her own use of *pointed indirectness* to publicly disparage the client's behavior. Deirdre's admission ignites a disagreement sequence between her and Mrs Collins concerning the propriety of her comments at the time.



Figure 1 Mannequin with a 'fingerwave' hairstyle.

Who was at fault?

In their attempts to establish who among them had a legitimate right to speak to the client, they also allege that the other's behavior served to undermine their respective expertise. For example, Mrs Collins asserts that Deirdre was neither the client's stylist nor a ratified member of her and the client's conversation and, hence, had no rightful claims as a discursive participant. She further implies that Deirdre's involvement infringed upon an implicit linguistic contract within the field – and conceivably within African American women's speech communities, in general (see Morgan, 1996, 1998) – which mandates honoring the boundaries of people's selective conversations with others (see Goodwin, 1990 for a similar discussion in relation to African American girls). A stylist's conversation with his/her client, it follows, is a private and personal affair. In contrast, Deirdre alleges that, in failing to align with her critique of the client, Mrs Collins violated what Goffman (1967) describes as a shared standard of considerateness between members of many communities of practice. Goffman notes:

Just as the member of any group is expected to have self respect, so also is he expected to sustain a standard of considerateness. He is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with others and with their feelings. In consequence, he is disin-

clined to witness the defacement of others. The person who can witness another's humiliation and unfeelingly retain a cool countenance himself is said in our society to be 'heartless,' just as he who can unfeelingly participate in his own defacement is thought to be 'shameless'. (pp. 10–11)

Deirdre, in turn, indicts Mrs Collins not only for her failure to initiate a *corrective process* (Goffman, 1967) designed to save the face of her students, but also because Mrs Collins allegedly '*sat there and let her [the client] do it*' (line 69–7).

Deirdre and Mrs Collins enrich our understandings of this breach as they articulate the various motivations behind their different face-saving strategies. Mrs Collins underscores the importance of keeping the peace (line 73) and addressing the concerns of her *own* client on the basis that the client 'came to [her]' (line 89) and 'I [Mrs Collins] did her hair' (line 100). Alternatively, Deirdre emphasizes her intent to problematize this and other clients' tendency to disrespect students at the school. She also affirms her own relative expertise as a student stylist.

Deirdre also seeks to shame Mrs Collins yet again for behavior felt to be disregarding of her and other members of her student cohort. For example, Deirdre borrows elements from Mrs Collins's prior script to construct her own narrative concerning what should have happened. In lines 90–93, she asserts, 'What first of all, no first of all, YOU should have took her in the office and talk to her about what you had to say to her. You shouldn't have even let her insult *US* (.) *on the floor* (.) *like she did*.' Deirdre's emphasis on 'YOU' juxtaposes Mrs Collins's prior admonition that students take their personal or professional complaints in the back room (Transcript 3, lines 24–26), situating her (Mrs Collins) as a worthy candidate for her own instruction. In doing so, Deirdre further highlights the potential for contradiction in Mrs Collins's remarks. It is also interesting to consider the manner with which Deirdre recalls the client's prior claims to expertise about her hair. In line 98–99, she caricatures the client as having proclaimed, '*I* (.) *Been* (.) *To* (.) *School*', when the client had, in fact, referenced her 46-year history caring for her own hair. Deirdre's recollection is congruent with her earlier perception that the client was effectively '[a]cting like she [was] the stylist' when she said those words.

Accounting for the breach

Deirdre's comments compel Mrs Collins to engage in face-saving work. Specifically, she reflects on past occasions in which clients have disrespected student stylists. This is an interesting shift.⁶ Whereas Mrs Collins sought to preserve the integrity of her scholarly advice and predictions in prior

remarks, she now aligns with Deirdre's perspective that clients need to be reminded that they are being serviced by students-in-training:

Transcript 5: Attempts to Resolve a Breach Episode

- 123 Mrs Collins: I had to set one person straight when when when when
124 with this lady came in there =
- 125 Deirdre: = And want fifty and sixty dollar jo::b!
- 126 Mrs Collins: = and insulted insulted Kenneth [male student]
- 127 Deirdre: That's what I'm saying!
- 128 Mrs Collins: = in front of. . .
- 129 Deirdre: That's wrong!
- 130 Mrs Collins: = and I had we you know I just nearly had to just break
131 down and just tell her off
- 132 Deirdre: [Because she they don't want to come and sit under
133 Kenneth – But this is a school!
- 134 Mrs Collins: [And and what made it so bad I had to you know she came
135 she felt so bad, she came back and apologized and let him
136 do it. I mean I had to really tell her off in front of Mrs
137 Jenkins [school owner and Mrs Collins's boss] that this is
138 a school and they're here to learn
- 139 Deirdre: But it's just exactly why that lady, when Jeannine was
140 doing that lady hair and she put her hand behind her hair
141 and she said, "*This is not a curl!*" and then YOU rush
142 over there to her rescue and you did her hair. Oh she was
143 happy because she know she got a professional to do her
144 hair! That is wro::ng. That's an insult to us because you
145 should've have said, "Well she's [Jeannine] going to have
146 to do her [client's] hair or another student gonna have to
147 do your hair." You shouldn't have to run to do her hair.

Mrs Collins's shift in footing (Goffman, 1979, 1981) may actually serve to accomplish several aims, including marking her alignment with Deirdre's concerns. By conveniently inserting details of her past record of protective service for students, she may also be performing retroactive face-work designed to challenge Deirdre's insinuation that she is disloyal. Accordingly, Mrs Collins's recollections make students aware of past situations in which she has not only fought to protect the social face of students, but has also done so in the presence of her boss, Mrs Jenkins – an ardent proponent of the mantra, 'The customer is always right.' Moreover, her remark expressly recalls an occasion in which she (*not* a student) shamed a client into publicly acknowledging their breach.

Deirdre, however, does not absolve Mrs Collins from her perceived culpability with regard to both the episode in question and other similar

grievances. Deirdre frequently injects concise remarks and, finally, a more lengthy exposition that emphasize Mrs Collins's culpability. Mrs Collins responds (with frequent interjections by Deirdre) by referencing a separate salon encounter involving a student named Jeannine and a client who was critical of Jeannine's service (lines 123–138). But Deirdre does not accept this record of past good and, in fact, refutes it. Deirdre alleges that rather than performing protective and/or corrective face work on Jeannine's behalf, Mrs Collins instead made rapid efforts to fix the client's hair. For Deirdre (and Jeannine), Mrs Collins's positionality as an established stylist with presumably more refined hairstyling knowledge and skill made this breach all the more acutely felt. Deirdre would have likely expanded her critique had she not been interrupted by the school owner, Mrs Jenkins. Mrs Jenkins asked them to quiet down and effectively ended the debate, but not the underlying tensions that fueled it. (Sadly, these issues continued to plague interactions between students, clients, and instructors throughout my tenure at the school since they implicated issues that lay at the heart of cosmetology students' professional becoming: language, expertise, and respect.)

What's at stake in breach episodes?

Emotional issues are a natural part of face-saving attempts (Goffman, 1967) and are intimated in the motivations compelling Deirdre's involvement in 'The Case of Multiple Breaches' (26 March 1998). The behavior of Mrs Collins's client evokes highly charged responses from Deirdre and other members of her cohort. As peripheral members of a community of hair care practitioners (Lave and Wenger, 1991), they are not only vulnerable to direct and indirect threats to their social face from knowledgeable clients and instructors, but they are also limited in the degree to which they can effectively minimize the consequences of such threats. Thus, even though peers and instructors at the school may explain that their breaches were unintentional and/or take responsibility for the consequences of their utterances, these breaches still incur considerable harm by sending the wrong message to clients who, in turn, said and did things that further undermined student stylists' expertise.

Recall, for example, the consequences of Mrs Collins's remarks to one of Deirdre's client. Mrs Collins told Deirdre, 'That looks good,' and then told her client, 'Yeah, I can see how you could have used another track.' Despite her initial compliment, Mrs Collins's remarks undermined Deirdre's professional face as a stylist and also served to corroborate the client's bid for additional tracks – a bid, if you recall, that Deirdre had already rejected on professional grounds. Further, even after Deirdre angrily exposed Mrs Collins's breach and Mrs Collins conceded her error, Mrs Collins was still

unable to prevent the client from stating, 'Yeah, that's what I think. I can have my daughter put them in.' This comment guaranteed that Deirdre would not have the final say on the client's style. Even worse, the client's remarks rescinded the privilege afforded to most stylists to advertise their skill and creativity through the client's final hairstyle (Edgerton, 1992; Hoffman, 1992; Jacobs-Huey, 1996a, 1996b). The implications of Mrs Collins' comment and the clients' remarks apparently left Deirdre few alternatives save to mark her disapproval through means of temporary work withdrawal and explicit critique.

Breaches, though, may also be enacted through more subtle means. Deirdre's account of the interaction between Mrs Collins, Jeannine, and Jeannine's client, for example, specifies the inappropriate manner in which Mrs Collins handled the client's grievance. Upon hearing the client complain, '*This is not a curl!*,' Mrs Collins is reported to have immediately attempted to 'fix' the curl, rather than reprimand the client for disregarding Jeannine and other students' status as apprentices. Mrs Collins's nonverbal behavior (i.e. rushing to the client) and her verbal behavior (i.e. silence about the client's breach) served, then, to both ratify the client's complaint and further subvert Jeannine and other students' authority as cosmetologists-in-training. In both this episode and the one depicted in Transcripts 3–5, Deirdre invokes an alternative narrative designed to publicly shame Mrs Collins for not engaging in protective and cooperative face-work. Ideally, this face-work would counteract what Goffman (1967) calls *incidents*, or events whose effective symbolic implications acutely threaten the face of her students. Significantly, Deirdre's counterscript also seeks to make Mrs Collins accountable to a shared (and exclusive) contract of considerateness. This contract would require that she abandon what Goffman (1967) calls a *defensive orientation* – or inclination to save her own face – in favor of a *protective orientation*, or regard to saving the face of others.

Teachable moments

Balancing the identities, aesthetic desires, and occasionally disparate preferences of clients and stylists during hair care can be a delicate process. Depending on the context, seemingly innocuous verbal and nonverbal behavior such as asking questions, pausing, hedging, and averting gaze can be considered *dispreferred* responses (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992) that challenge the stylist's expertise or the client's privilege as a customer who is 'always right.' More overt cases of 'problematic' responses by a client often evoke subsequent evaluations from his/her stylist and bystanders concerning their perceived transgression (Goffman, 1967, 1981). Frequently, in marking the perceived breach as somehow improper

– a feature of what Goffman (1981) calls *bracketing* – these metacommentaries also reveal tacit beliefs about the communicative roles befitting service providers and service recipients. Further, they emphasize African American women's diverse linguistic repertoires insofar as they invoke cultural (e.g. *indirectness, reading*) and professional 'ways of speaking' to harness lessons from the breach.

The reflexivity typically elicited in such interactions make breach episodes prime sites in which to investigate language socialization at work, at multiple levels. Bracketing efforts signal both a speaker's improper communicative behavior and the implicit linguistic contract which their behavior apparently breached (Goffman, 1981). In doing so, these evaluative remarks educate a speaker in the error of his/her ways and also extends him/her an opportunity to take responsibility for the consequences of his/her utterance. Clients' and stylists' acknowledgment of his/her error can serve to absolve them from any intention to harm or disrespect another's social face (Goffman, 1967) and thus complies with underlying scripts governing professional hair care encounters. Though bracketing attempts may, at times, fail to evoke a pardoning plea from the perpetrator of a communicative breach, they still have the potential to act as teachable moments. For example, stylists' exposure of a client's breach may resemble a mere complaint. Yet, in the event that a stylist's complaint is corroborated by bystanders and, significantly, his/her colleagues, it may also serve to socialize stylists into shared beliefs about the communicative and behavioral norms which constitute them as hair care professionals.

The preceding discussion of breaches and the implicit linguistic contracts or scripts they subvert is relevant to discussions that have taken place in other research on talk-in-interaction. Hutchins (1993) has shown error correction to be a central means through which novice navigators learn to behave competently in the teamwork of ship navigation. Further, he notes that every error correction event among ship navigators is a learning context not just for the person who commits the error but for all who witness it (see also Friedman, 2007). Similarly, Miller (1987) has also described how tacit processes of argumentation, particularly conversants' co-construction of statements of difference and collaborative search for the resolution of contradictions, serve to advance an individual's knowledge and perspective. Here, argumentation is analogous to breach episodes and evaluation is congruous with that of repair. Moreover, Mertz's (1992) study illuminates how law professors consistently used students' response errors to highlight the importance of taking a position as a means to gaining legal power. In particular, the professor selected various students with whom to *co-construct* an articulation and evaluation of the mistake, thus making favored response structures all the more apparent to students. These findings suggest that breaches in everyday communication can trigger

'teachable moments' within communities of practice that clarify speakers' notions about proper verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Whether enacted by clients or stylists, inadvertently or intentionally, breaches are prime occasions in which to investigate cosmetology students' socialization into expert roles and dispositions. Discourse analysis illuminates how students' everyday engagement with others during 'floorwork' can present occasional threats to their social face (Goffman, 1967). The speech styles that student and licensed stylists employ to mitigate such threats reveal implicit standards for client-stylist and stylist-stylist communication. They also underscore the importance of cultural (e.g. *indirectness, reading*) and professional (i.e. cosmetological) 'ways of speaking' in constituting African American stylists as communicatively competent (Hymes, 1972) within their field of practice.

In describing the language attitudes and strategies that comprise their face-work (Goffman, 1967), my findings highlight how students are socialized *through* and *to* professional identity and language use (Garrett and Baquedano-López, 2002; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986) – even in the violation and subsequent reconstitution of cosmetological scripts governing stylists' verbal and nonverbal behavior. Specifically, data show how breach episodes can instigate speakers to evaluate their own or others' degree of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Breaches thus act as gatekeeping devices insofar as they serve to distinguish experts from novices and socialize novices into experts. Breaches also afford practitioners opportunities to shore up their expertise by correcting the verbal and nonverbal mistakes of others.

Finally, the preceding analysis underscores the significance of speaker intentionality and accountability and, ultimately, forgiveness in African American women's assessment of various breach episodes. As stylists Deirdre and Mrs Collins vividly remind us: while it is indeed human to err, if we are fortunate, we can forgive and be forgiven. But if not, we can still learn many important lessons along the way.

Notes

- 1 All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
- 2 Discourse analysts appreciate context and cultural and background knowledge (Duranti, 1997; Goodwin and Duranti, 1992) as critical to our understandings of everyday talk and interaction. By attending to the situated nature of naturally occurring talk and its bearings upon people's identities and beliefs, discourse analysis provides useful insights into what happens when speakers violate implicit rules governing talk and interaction (see Jordan, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Silverstein, 1981, 1985, 1993; Wilce, 1995, 2004).

- 3 Yet, this does not mean that African American stylists abandon cultural ways of speaking about hair altogether. For African American cosmetology students who service a predominantly African American female clientele, the development of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) often requires fluency in both professional (i.e. cosmetological) and cultural ways of speaking (Jacobs-Huey, 2003, 2006); that is, Black stylists must be able to properly use and interpret formal and informal hair terminology, as well as indirect and direct cultural speech styles since Black women exploit all of these communicative options during hair care encounters.
- 4 These roles are not always distinct as clients can, at times, be called upon to share their own expertise about the idiosyncrasies of their hair during salon encounters (Jacobs-Huey, 2006).
- 5 Transcription conventions:
- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| [| a left-hand bracket indicates the onset of overlapping, simultaneous utterances. |
| (0.1) | indicates the length of a pause within or between utterances, timed in tenths of a second. |
| (()) | double parentheses enclose nonverbal and other descriptive information. |
| () | single parentheses enclose words that are not clearly audible (i.e. best guesses). |
| <u>Underline</u> | underlining indicates stress on a syllable or word(s). |
| <i>Italics</i> | italics indicate talk that is in some way animated or performed (i.e. sarcasm). |
| Cap First Letter | words or phrases with capitalized first letter(s) indicate talk that is carefully articulated or talk that is punctuated by a brief pause. |
| CAPS | upper case indicates louder or shouted talk. |
| : | a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound; the more colons, the longer the sound. |
| ° | this symbol is placed before and after words or phrases that are delivered in a soft volume. |
| ↓ | down arrow marks words or phrases delivered with a downward intonational contour. |
| . | period signals finality and indicates words or phrases delivered with falling intonation. |
| > < | 'greater than' and 'less than' symbols enclose words and/or talk that is compressed or rushed. |
| < > | 'less than' and 'greater than' symbols enclose words and/or talk that is markedly slowed or drawn out. |
| < | the 'less than' symbol by itself indicates that the immediately following talk is 'jump-started', i.e. sounds like it starts with a rush. |

- , -- a single or double hyphens also indicate talk that is either ‘jump-started’, i.e. sounds like it starts with a rush, or talk that ends abruptly.
- Hh the letter *h* marks hearable aspiration; the more h’s, the more aspiration. Aspiration may represent breathing, laughter, and so on. If it occurs inside the boundaries of a word, it may be enclosed in parentheses in order to set it apart from the sounds of the word.
- (hh)
- Heh marks laughter.
- (try 1)/(try 2) this arrangement of words/phrases encircled by parentheses and separated by a single oblique or slash represents two alternate hearings.

6 The antecedents of Mrs Collins’s shift actually begin in Transcript 3 (see lines 46–47 and 49); there she begins the work of aligning, albeit strategically, with Deirdre’s complaint.

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