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What is This?

# Complaining and the Management of Face in Online Counseling

## Wyke Stommel[1] and Fleur van der Houwen[1]

## Abstract

In this article, we analyze how clients in online counseling by email do complaining. Complaining is a "face-threatening act" and can jeopardize the relationship between interlocutors. In online health interventions, we see high dropout rates. We suggest that because the interaction between client and counselor is at the basis of counseling, it is important to understand how a communicative act (e.g., a complaint) that signals potential dropout is constructed sequentially. Based on a corpus of 20 email exchanges, we illustrate how clients constructed complaints over several sentences and sometimes various emails, and how they designed the complaints to minimize threat to the counselor's face. Counselors, in their responses, used various strategies to manage face threats. We show how complaints were mitigated to protect the counseling relationship and suggest that this is useful knowledge for health professionals.

In this article, we analyze complaints and the management of face in the context of online counseling.[1] We use the term *online counseling* for counseling or coaching via the Internet using media such as email and chat. This method of counseling, now actively promoted in the Netherlands (e.g., the Dutch policy document *Health Close By*; Rijksoverheid, 2011), is becoming more popular and is believed to increase the quality of health care for those with mental health problems.

Although an increasing number of scholars are studying online counseling, in few studies have the details of communication between clients and counselors via online media been examined. In this article, we briefly discuss two studies to illustrate the contributions of such research. In one article (Harris, Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2012), the authors discuss their study of the ways in which counselors make indirect requests to switch from email to telephone interaction. They found that the design (e.g., the lexical choice, syntax, tense) of requests can soften the imposition of the request to switch from email to telephone. Thus, counselors are able to display sensitiveness to the clients' needs and avoid jeopardizing the counselor–client relationship.

Another aspect of email counseling that researchers have analyzed is recipient design (i.e., how language users design their utterances for their interlocutor) through forms of address (Stommel, 2012). The form of address is relevant for languages, such as Dutch, that offer the choice between a formal and an informal form

of addressing an email recipient (in Dutch we have the distinction *u/jij*, much like the French *vous/tu*). The analysis revealed that counselors initially use the formal form to address their clients, but that clients tend to initiate the use of informal forms of address and thus initiate a closer relationship. The counselors usually accept the client's preference by following the shift from formal to informal. Sometimes, however, counselors forget to use the informal form. This failure to maintain consistent recipient design jeopardizes the counseling relationship. Hence, Stommel (2012) suggested that in online counseling, counselors are not always sensitive to the nature of the relationship they have coconstructed with their clients. How clients and counselors build and maintain the online counseling relationship is, therefore, an important area of study and is presumably related to treatment outcomes (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2009). We are able to add to the body of research by investigating an interactional practice that has so far received little attention, namely, clients' complaints in online counseling.

First, we give some background on online counseling and the problem of high dropout rates. Then, we discuss some of the studies in which online interaction in health

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settings was examined, followed by a description of the data and method we used in this study. In the analysis section, we examine how clients complained about (aspects of) counseling; specifically, we analyze the design and interactional context of these complaints and how counselors responded. In the conclusion, we make preliminary suggestions for how the counselor–client relationship in online counseling and the problem of high dropout rates might be related.

## Online Counseling and Dropout Rates

The focus of our study was an online counseling program offered to people who had moderate symptoms of anxiety or depression based on email support provided by a counselor. Generally, online counseling has been found to be cost effective and as successful as many face-to-face interventions (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2009; Riper et al., 2007). Researchers, however, have determined that dropout rates in online counseling are as high as 60% (Andersson & Cuijpers; Seekles, 2011). Some reasons for high dropout rates are technical difficulties in using the online program, computer problems, or changing email addresses (Dunn, Casey, Sheffield, Newcombe, & Chang, 2012).

One of the unique features of online counseling that influences dropout rates is the level of contact with a health professional (Christensen, Griffiths, & Farrer, 2009). It is unclear, however, what this contact looks like or what it should look like to lower dropout rates. A first step is to examine what health professionals write to their clients (Almlöv, Carlbring, Berger, Cuijpers, & Andersson, 2009). In this article, we examine emails from both clients and counselors and look specifically at how complaints were formulated and responded to.

## Complaining and the Management of "Face"

Heinemann and Traverso (2009) defined complaining as expressing "feelings of discontent about some state of affairs, for which responsibility can be attributed to 'someone' (to some person, organization or the like)" (p. 2381). In previous studies, complaints have been characterized as direct when the complaint is about the recipient (Dersley & Wootton, 2000) and as indirect when the complaint is about an absent party (Drew, 1998; Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). The complaints that we examine were direct in the sense that clients addressed the counselor and not an absent party; however, they were sometimes redirected at the medium of counseling rather than at the counselors themselves.

Scholars have conducted extensive research on complaining in everyday conversation (Dersley & Wootton, 2000; Mandelbaum, 1991) and in institutional settings (Monzoni, 2009; Orthaber & Márquez-Reiter, 2011). In everyday settings, it appears that complaint recipients tend to align with complaints about a third party (Drew, 1998). Conversely, in institutional settings, recipients frequently resist complaints. For instance, professionals resist complaints about colleagues (Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009); service call takers disaffiliate with complaints about the company (Orthaber & Márquez-Reiter); and in emergency calls to an ambulance, complaint recipients accept that there was a mistake but deny responsibility.

In spoken interaction, complaints are frequently designed indirectly or implicitly (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009). Vásquez (2011) suggested that in online settings, the complaint does not need to be designed delicately or implicitly because of the relative anonymity of both complainant and complaint recipient. This anonymity, however, does not mean that relational aspects are irrelevant, because complainants often protect their own face by presenting themselves as "not the complaining type" (Vásquez, p. 1715) and, therefore, display an interest in how the readers view them. A way of approaching the relational aspects of complaining is politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), based on the concept of "face" as it is used in everyday language (e.g., "losing face" when humiliated) and on which Goffman (1967) had already elaborated. Brown and Levinson defined face as the "public self-image" that interactants want to claim for themselves, which consists of two related aspects—negative and positive face:

> Negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction—i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

> Positive face: a person's positive self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants. (p. 61)

In politeness theory, complaining is a face-threatening act (FTA) for both the complainant and the recipient, and can jeopardize the relationship between interlocutors. Because of that danger, participants usually display attempts to redress or minimize the face threat by attending to the positive or negative face needs of their interlocutors. Politeness has been found to be a useful way to analyze institutional interaction for the purpose of gaining more insight into the norms that interlocutors attend to in such settings (Harris, 2003). A complaint in online counseling is especially face threatening compared to other institutional settings (e.g., customer service, court,

and politics). A complaint implies a threat to the counselor's positive self-image or "personality," and also risks jeopardizing the (apparent) camaraderie between client and counselor. Additionally, the social distance between the client and counselor increases, which could have negative implications for the counseling relationship—a relationship that should be one of trust and closeness. The negative face of the counselor might also be threatened when the complaint targets the counselor's professional identity.

## The Study

### Data

Our data consisted of 20 email threads between counselors (referred to as "coaches" in the analysis section, which is the label participants used themselves) and clients who participated as part of a research project on interactional aspects of online counseling via chat and email (see also Stommel & van der Houwen, 2013). The online counseling program was developed for research purposes at a department of clinical psychology. The clients ($n = 20$) had moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety. The coaches ($n = 5$) were master's students in psychology and had received training in providing email support.

Ethical considerations are important when studying online environments, including online counseling. All clients were informed about the study and gave their written consent. The ethical research design of the study was in line with most of the guidelines proposed by Flicker, Haans, and Skinner (2004; see also Stommel & van der Houwen, 2013). The focus of the online counseling program was on general support, meaning that the counselors were asked to offer "a listening ear" to show an interest in issues relevant to their clients' current circumstances (e.g., How was your past week?), to show empathy, and to give advice. The importance of the counseling relationship was stressed in the training on how to provide support.

The program encompassed 5 weeks in which the clients were invited to write one email per week to their counselor and then receive feedback from their counselor. We analyzed all messages written by client–counselor pairs within a thread.[2] In principle, a complete counseling thread consisted of 11 emails: one start-up email from the counselor, 5 client emails, and 5 coach responses. In the start-up email, the clients received the following instruction:

> In this email you can discuss various issues, in as far as you feel the need. In your first email you could maybe begin to tell what kinds of things you do in daily life (for instance, work, hobbies, family, and friends) and how you are doing.

> You can maybe also write down what you have experienced the past week.

If clients wanted to discuss things that were not directly related to the counseling (e.g., a complaint), sometimes they wrote an extra email.

### Method

For analysis we draw on conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), the notion of face (Goffman, 1967), and the related notion of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversation analysis (CA) is a method used to study both casual conversation and institutional interaction; for instance, how participants take turns, how conversational actions are ordered in sequences, and how these actions are designed. Increasingly, CA is also used to analyze online data, such as chat (Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003; Stommel & van der Houwen, 2013), email (Harris et al., 2012), and forum interaction (Stommel & Koole, 2010; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009).

Two main CA concepts that are useful in analyzing email counseling are action and design. Harris et al. (2012), for instance, focused on the action of requesting and the design of requests (e.g., lexical choice, syntax, tense) by analyzing what this design accomplished. In our analysis, we focused on the action of complaining and the design of complaints. Additionally, we examined the management of face on both the action level and the design level of actions.

Initially, we studied the material by reading the interactions closely. We found various accounts that appeared to be complaints about the counseling or the counselor. Next, we identified all instances of complaining by clients, using the definition of complaints by Heinemann and Traverso (2009): "feelings of discontent about some state of affairs, for which responsibility can be attributed to 'someone' (to some person, organization or the like)" (p. 2381). We identified clients' complaints in 7 of 20 counseling threads. We selected the three most severe cases of complaining and the coaches' responses to these complaints for a microanalysis. The microanalysis involved the analysis of actions (evaluating, requesting) in which the complaint was embedded and the design of the complaints (lexical choice, passive/active construction, subjective/objective design, and so forth). For both actions and design, we analyzed the way in which they were related to the management of face, attending to the interlocutor's or one's own positive or negative face.

## Analysis

The three complaints we selected for microanalysis were directed at various aspects of the noninteractive nature of

the communication (email as opposed to chat), the impersonal aspect (not knowing the coach), and the type of support (lack of advice). In this section, we examine how clients designed their complaints. Following the analysis of a client's complaint, we analyze how the coach responded. The first two examples are single email complaints. The third case (Extracts 5 to 9) illustrates how a client's complaint unfolded over a series of emails. The extracts we show were translated from Dutch, which is why the English is awkward at times (the translations are made to maintain Dutch sentence structure as much as possible; moreover, the original Dutch text also is sometimes awkward and nonstandard). We used pseudonyms for clients and coaches, and fictional dates, but the original timestamp was identified.

Extract 1 was taken from the beginning of the client's third email to the coach. It is an example of how a complaint was embedded in a client-initiated general evaluation of the counseling, which preceded "content-talk" about the client's problems. In the analysis, we focused on how the design of the complaint redressed its face-threatening quality.

### Extract 1: Client > coach
### 7/17/2009 10:13 Subject: RE: feedback
### to your email week 2

```
 1  First I want to say how I find it
 2  'therapy' in this way, I like it to
 3  let the words roll from my fingers
 4  so to say, without being distracted
 5  by someone's gaze, words or my own
 6  feelings of insecurity. On the
 7  other side it does feel very
 8  impersonal in this way. and it's
 9  not a real conversation (then I
10  should have chosen chatting). Don't
11  know who I have in front of me. Ask
12  myself f.i., are you a psychologist
13  or are you still studying? Also
14  there is no non-verbal
15  communication and you can't see
16  what type of person I am. I do have
17  the idea that I benefit from it,
18  namely: I get sincere attention,
19  can vent my story to an objective
20  person that knows about the psyche.
```

In Extract 1 we could identify three parts. The sequence began with the announcement of an evaluation (we used the term *evaluation* to describe the larger speech act that introduces the complaint) of the treatment (lines [LL] 1–2). The evaluation consisted of a positive part (LL 2–6), a negative part (LL 6–16), and then another positive part (LL 16–20). The email continued with a discussion of issues that were relevant to the client's problems (not shown).

The negative part, which was the actual complaint, referred to specific aspects of online counseling (LL 6–16), such as "It does feel very impersonal," or "There is no non-verbal communication." The complaint was designed in ways that minimized the face threat, which is inherent in complaining. On the basis of our analysis, we identified four design features. First, the embeddedness of the complaint in a general evaluation mitigated the complaint. The positive aspects mentioned at the beginning of the evaluation (LL 3–6) and the moderately positive third part, which appeared to be formulated as a conclusion (LL 16–20), diminished the force of the complaints. Thus, by using an evaluation format that included positive remarks, the risk of the face threat related to complaining was decreased.[3]

Second, three of the negative observations that comprised the complaining sequence were designed as impersonal or objective rather than subjective (Wiggins & Potter, 2003): "On the other side it does feel" (LL 6–7), "It's not a real conversation" (LL 8–9), and "There is no non-verbal communication" (LL 14–15). Two additional negative observations were designed as "factual": "Don't know who I have in front of me" (LL 10–11) and "You can't see what type of person I am" (LL 15-16).[4] In contrast, the announcement at the beginning of the email and the positive observations had a personal subjective design: "How I find it" (L 1), "I like it" (L 2), and "I do have the idea" (LL 16–17). By designing the negative assessments objectively and factually, the client ascribed the complaints to the medium of communication (L1). Using this practice, the client was able to protect the positive face of the coach, because it reduced her responsibility for the complaints and, therefore, diminished their status as complaints.

The subjective or personal design of the positive assessments can be attributed to the fact that they were compliments. Generally, compliments are seen as appealing to the positive face of the addressee. In this institutional setting, however, initiating topics such as an evaluation of the counseling and making compliments without "invitation" might actually have been a threat to the coach's negative face. Topics not related to the counseling could conflict with the coach's management of the interaction and become imposing. The evaluation including the compliments put the client in the position to judge the counseling and, by extension, the coach. The subjective design redressed the face threat because it rendered the evaluation and the compliments as more personal than general. Third, between brackets (LL 9–10), the

client referred to her own responsibility for choosing email rather than chat. This implied that she did not blame the coach for offering email counseling but that she blamed herself for not having signed up for the chat counseling. This self-accusation also minimized face loss for the coach.

Fourth, embedded in the complaint was a question that was presented as an example of not knowing who was in front of her ("Ask myself f.i., are you a psychologist or are you still studying?" [LL 12–13]). This question was face threatening to the coach because it questioned her professional qualifications. Designing this question as an example by using "for instance" downgraded its relevance and, thus, the face threat. Moreover, by formulating the question as something the client wondered about rather than a direct question (e.g., Are you a psychologist?), she eliminated the requirement of an answer and, therefore, the face threat. Furthermore, the evaluation's conclusion redressed the face threat by categorizing the coach positively as an "objective person that knows about the psyche" (LL 19–20). The counselor responded to the client's evaluation of online counseling in the message that followed immediately, as shown in Extract 2.

### Extract 2: Coach > client
### 7/20/2009 9:48 Subject: Feedback to
### your email week 3

```
 1  Nice that by writing you can let
 2  the words roll from your fingers
 3  and that you don't have distraction
 4  from others or insecurity. It is
 5  also very nice to read that you
 6  notice that you benefit from the
 7  email support, the attention and
 8  venting your story. I can imagine
 9  that apart from that it feels quite
10  impersonal. This way of
11  'communicating' provides the
12  advantages that you mentioned
13  yourself but also brings the
14  disadvantages. Mainly that you miss
15  a lot of information, like personal
16  contact and non-verbal
17  communication. Concerning the
18  question who you have in front of
19  you; I graduated in 2006 as a
20  clinical psychologist.
```

In our analysis of the coach's response presented in Extract 2, we focused on the way in which the coach dealt with the face threat that was intrinsic to the client's complaint. Overall, the response was designed such that it warded off responsibility for the complaint; therefore, the coach "saved her own face." The following features of the design of her response played a part in her ability to save face.

First, the response constructed the client's negative observations as factual characteristics of "this way of 'communicating,'" similar to the way in which the client designed them: "This way of 'communicating' provides the advantages that you mentioned yourself but also brings the disadvantages. Mainly that you miss a lot of information, like personal contact and non-verbal communication" (LL 15–17). As was the case in the client's complaint, this design based on facts protected the coach's positive face because it implied that she had no influence or responsibility for these "facts" related to the medium of online counseling.

Second, the coach's response aligned with the general evaluation of the counseling by mirroring many descriptions in the client's email ("nice," "let the words roll from your fingers," "distraction," "insecurity," "attention," "venting your story," "feels," and "impersonal"[5]) and also duplicated the "order" of the evaluation of positive first and negative second. (The second "nice" assessment in L 5, however, referred to the conclusion of the client's evaluation, so the positive aspects were reorganized in the coach's response.) Alignment was also constructed by the expression, "I can imagine that apart from that it feels quite impersonal"[5] (LL 8–10). The alignment was an orientation to the client's positive face, agreeing with and acknowledging her concerns. The alignments were also a way of disregarding the face threat inherent in the client's complaining.

Third, the response treated part of the complaint as a question rather than a complaint, thus removing the face threat. The client asked an indirect question about the coach's professional status as an example of the implicit negative assessment—"don't know who I have in front of me" (Extract 1, LL 10–11). The coach, conversely, referred to the indirect question only ("concerning the question"). This was a way of disregarding the complaint, because "don't know who I have in front of me" potentially referred to much more than only professional qualifications. However, answering the client's question indicated that part of the complaint was solved and, therefore, no longer jeopardized the coach's face. [6]

What we could conclude from the response was that the coach aligned with the assessments but did not treat them as complaints and, as such, warded off culpability for them, saving her own face. In this regard, the response resembled a "not-at-fault denial," which means that "the complainee implicitly acknowledges some element of truth in the original complaint, but he or she overwhelmingly rejects any culpability for the action in question"

(Dersley & Wootton, 2000, p. 388). The second example shows how a client did not address a content topic related to counseling but rather framed the topic of her email as a request to switch from email counseling to chat counseling (which was also an option of the counseling program). This request created the context for the complaint that follows. We removed greetings at the beginning and end of this email; otherwise, Extract 3 shows the full email.

### Extract 3: Client > Coach
### 12/10/2009 22:35 Subject: Re: Feedback to your email week 3

```
 1  Is it also possible to switch to
 2  chat contact? I notice that the
 3  mails have the same tone all the
 4  time, it almost seems as if they
 5  are answered by a computer. Maybe
 6  there is more space for interaction
 7  in a chat. I initially understood
 8  that that was also among the
 9  possibilities. This email exchange
10  comes across enormously distant and
11  impersonal if I am being honest. I
12  have no idea if I am emailing a
13  fictitious person or a real one?
14  Or if a group of students is busy
15  with it....... In short, I try to
16  get fun/use out of formulating my
17  brain concoctions.... out of what I
18  write myself i try to get something
19  for myself. But I can almost draft
20  the answer mail that comes back
21  Myself. Or is that also the idea?
```

In Extract 3, the client introduced the complaint by means of a request to switch to chat contact (L 1). Requests threaten the recipient's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Harris, 2003) because they "impede the addressee's actions." Not all requests, however, are equally face threatening; "come in" or "do sit down" were low threats to the addressee's want to be unimpeded by others. The client's request to switch to another medium of communication was possibly a relatively low threat, especially because it introduced the complaint as indirect rather than direct. The client attended to the coach's face wants by proposing a change of medium, rather than a change of coach, as a solution to the complaint.

The request was followed by an account of the request, which substantiated the complaint. As in Extract 1, there were various negative observations of the email counseling support (L 3; LL 10–11). The negative observations

about the method of communication were designed objectively and were depersonalized (e.g., "the mails" rather than "your mails") in Extract 3, which diminished the coach's responsibility. The client also remarked about the professional identity of the coach (lines LL 12–14). But unlike Extract 1, in which the client framed the question of identity as "I am wondering," in Extract 3, the client formulated the complaint in terms of insufficient knowledge (i.e., "I have no idea") and stated alternatives ("a fictitious person or a real one, a group of students" [L 13]). These alternatives openly threatened the coach's face, which was only mitigated at the end of the extract (i.e., "Or is that also the idea?" [L 21]), which would allow the coach to deflect the complaint.

In summary, we saw in Extract 3 various ways in which the client managed face while complaining. First, the client introduced the complaint in the form of a request, making the complaint indirect rather than direct. Second, the complaints were designed objectively and were depersonalized, which distanced both the client and the coach from the complaint and gave the coach a "way out." This opportunity to save face was reinforced toward the end of the email, which allowed the coach to confirm the nature ("the idea") of online counseling, which, in turn, revoked the complaint. The coach responded to the client's email as follows:

### Extract 4: Coach > client
### 12/18/2009 13:17 Subject: Re: Feedback to your email week 3

```
 1  Thank you for your email. I find it
 2  terrible to hear, that you do not
 3  to get [sic] that from the email
 4  support as what you had hoped. You
 5  indicated that the emails are
 6  written in a same tone and that you
 7  experience them as distant and
 8  impersonal. I find it a real pity
 9  that these emails came across to
10  you as such. Obviously this is not
11  the idea of the email support. I
12  try to help with this email support
13  to diminish your problems and teach
14  how you can deal with your
15  problems. I try therefore also to
16  answer your mails with care and
17  attention. You write that you have
18  the idea that the emails are
19  answered by a computer. I can
20  assure you that this is not the
21  case. I have been trained as a
22  coach in a help providing
23  profession. I try, where possible,
```

```
24  to make you think about your
25  problems with the aim that maybe
26  you get extra insight in the
27  problems and can find a solution.
28  I try also to summarize clearly the
29  thoughts that you write down so as
30  to order them. It is unfortunately
31  not possible to switch to the chat
32  support. Obviously I hope that you
33  want to continue with the email
34  support. You can of course indicate
35  yourself if you want to pursue
36  certain issues or rather not. I
37  hope that with this in this manner
38  you can progress. I will do my best
39  here. I hope for your further
40  participation and wish you happy
41  Christmas holidays and a good and
42  healthy 2010.
```

The coach's response addressed the complaint directly. The coach treated the negative observations, which were framed by the client as a request to switch to chat, as a threat to her positive face. In her answer, the coach reframed the complaint about online counseling to be a complaint about her personally ("I find it terrible" [LL 1–2]; "I find it a real pity" [L8]).

The coach also summarized what the client wrote ("you indicated that" [LL 4–5], "you write that" [L 17]), which was found frequently in many of the coach's emails. In these summaries, various design features that mirrored the client's objective design of the complaint (e.g., "the email support" vs., e.g., "the email support I give"; "the emails" vs. "my emails," "obviously this is not the idea of") were apparent. We suggest that this summarization, which mirrored the client's formulations, led the client to remark initially that "I can almost draft the answer mail that comes back myself" (Extract 2, LL 19–21). Possibly the coach's promise to do her best (L 19) appeared contradictory and might have led the client to think she was not heard. There is a fine line between summarizing (which is what the coach said she did in L 28) and repeating back someone else's words. This concept could be explored further. The client did not respond and did not continue the email support.

Our analysis included two instances of email complaints that were embedded in different kinds of actions (evaluating, requesting) and minimized threats to the coach's face. The third case we analyzed was similar, but it is important to note because it gives insight into interactional emergence, or the development of a complaint about

online counseling. The analysis implied that if the coach's response to the complaint was insufficient, the client would be led to reiterate and possibly intensify the complaint. Extracts 5–7 show the first three messages of an email thread. Line numbers are continuous across these three extracts to avoid confusion of reference in the analysis.

### Extract 5: Client > coach
### 2/22/2010 18:19 Subject: Re: beginning of email support

```
1  I also was curious about your course
2  on dealing with anxiety and if I
3  could learn something from this but
4  unfortunately I did not end up in
5  that group. But who knows you have
6  some good suggestions?
```

### Extract 6: Coach > client
### 2/25/2010 11:07 Subject: Feedback to your email week 1

```
 7  I can imagine that you are
 8  disappointed that you cannot
 9  participate in the course because
10  you were assigned to this group. I
11  hope that I can still offer you a
12  bit of support in the next five
13  weeks!
```

### Extract 7: Client > coach
### 2/25/2010 21:09 Subject: Re: Feedback to your email week 1

```
14  It is nice that you want to be of
15  help but i hoped that you could
16  give me advice with regard to my
17  phobia and how to deal with this. I
18  also hoped that the course could
19  give me new insights despite that I
20  have already in some detail looked
21  into possible solutions and advice.
22  But of course you have more a
23  coaching role. Well I am open to
24  suggestions…
```

Early on in this counseling thread (the client's first email, shown in Extract 5), the client expressed her disappointment about being assigned to the group of clients who received email counseling as opposed to the group that was enrolled in the online course. The articulation of positive expectations followed by disappointment ("I also was curious . . . but unfortunately" [LL 1–4]) can be heard as complaining (Vásquez, 2011). However, it was a method of complaining with fewer risks to face, because disappointment emphasized being personally affected rather than ascribing culpability to the coach and the institution she represented. Another redressive action was the client's question (LL 5–6), which can be described as a positive politeness strategy. This strategy aligned with the goal of counseling, which was that both participants should have an interest in the client's progress. A similar question appeared in Extract 3: "Or is that also the idea?" With such questions, clients expressed a common goal and at the same time offered the coach the possibility to provide an answer that secured a position as being unaccountable for the complaint.

In response, the coach displayed empathy ("I can imagine . . . " [LL 7–8]) and, thus, identified with the client's disappointment rather than aligning with those who assigned clients to variants of the counseling program (note the passive construction "because you were assigned to this group," which did not refer to who assigned her to this group). She mirrored the contrast in the client's email by first articulating disappointment and then expressing hopefulness about the success of the online counseling. In mirroring, the coach aligned with the client's positive face needs (see also Extract 4). However, regarding lexical choice, the coach's formulation differed from the client's ("a bit of support" [L 6] vs. "good suggestions" [L 3]). Therefore, she responded to the client's indirect request for advice by offering a little bit of support instead of advice.

It is this "substitution" that the client objected to in her following email. She expressed discontent with support only ("nice . . ., but" [LL 14–15]) and then switched between her need for advice and the coach's offer of a bit of support: She explained what she wanted (advice and new insights), then contrasted this ("but") with the "coaching role" (LL 22–23), and, finally, reiterated her need for advice ("suggestions" [L 24]). Therefore, although the coach did not frame her offer of support as a refusal to give advice, the client assumed that the coach refused to give advice by focusing on the difference between advice and support. The client minimized the face threat in the articulation of their desires by selecting the word *hope* instead of a word expressing need, and by suggesting that the coach's role was "of course more a coaching role" (LL 22–23). Moreover, the utterance "Well I am open to suggestions . . ." syntactically was a proposition rather than a question/request, which reduced

the sequential requirement of a response to this topic. This was exactly how the coach treated the proposition: She did not respond to the issue in her next email.

At the end of the counseling thread (three emails from the coach and four from the client had passed), the coach expressed her hope that the online counseling helped the client in some way (Extract 8). In response, the client wrote an email with a lengthy complaint about the online counseling, reiterating her disappointment about the lack of advice (see Extract 9). Note that line numbers continue from Extracts 8 to 9.

### Extract 8: Coach > client 3/25/2010 17:16 Subject: Feedback to your email week 5

```
1  I hope that the feedback that I have
2  given you over the past five weeks
3  has been useful. I at least found it
4  pleasant to coach you. Again my
5  compliments for mailing every week!
6  I wish you all the luck for the
7  future! And hope of course that you
8  find a way to fully get rid of your
9  anxiety!
```

### Extract 9: Client > coach 3/25/2010 18:06 Subject: Re: Feedback to your email week 5

```
10  Thank you for your time and
11  attention that you have given me
12  and the evaluation of our
13  conversations. If I am being very
14  honest the feedback has not been
15  very useful. I had hoped that you
16  could lead and guide me in finding
17  a solution to my anxiety or in what
18  direction I should go. Maybe it is
19  good with a next client to ask
20  about the expectations so that that
21  unrealistic expectations.
    [5 lines omitted]
22  I also asked you if maybe as a
23  psychologist you have a suggestion
24  about where I could be helped with
25  my problem. For me it was not
26  important to tell my story, but to
27  finally get rid of that anxiety.
    [5 lines omitted]
28  Oh well. I am still left with the
29  question where I can best find
30  help.
```

In the coach's last email (Extract 8), she ended with an evaluative paragraph, expressing her hope that the feedback "has been useful" (LL 1–3). She went on evaluating the counseling by assessing and complimenting the client in her role as a client (LL 4–5]) and wishing her the best (LL 6–9), which is how counseling email threads are typically closed. Because this was the last email from the coach, a reply from the client was not expected. After five feedback messages, the counseling was completed and coaches were formally "disconnected" from the particular client. However, the client did not accept the coach's closing.

The last email from the client (Extract 9) was notably more challenging than the earlier complaining emails because it challenged the coach's status as a professional. The complaint was a negative evaluation of the counseling ("the feedback has not been very useful" [LL 14–15]) that the client ascribed to not having been offered any suggestions from the coach "as a psychologist" (LL 22–25) about where she could find help for her problems. Thus, she constructed the role of a psychologist as one that was associated with having knowledge of different kinds of treatments (cf. Schegloff, 2007). By focusing on the coach's professional status and related unmet expectations, the face of the coach as a professional was at risk. Moreover, the client advised the coach to ask future clients what their expectations were (LL 18–21). Giving advice is a face threatening act, often carefully designed (Stommel and Lamerichs, in press). Although we could see some redressive work here too ("maybe it is good" [LL 18–19]), the coach's professional authority was being seriously threatened in this email. The client stated that she still did not know where to find help (LL 28–30), which emphasized that this coach failed to help her.

In summary, what we observed in this case was that a complaint about online counseling had an interactional history. The first occurrence of the complaint strongly reduced face threat by focusing on disappointment and asking a question about receiving suggestions for how to solve her problem. In the second complaint, the client explicitly stated her needs, which were more than just support as offered by the counselor. In doing so, the coach's face was threatened. However, the client redressed by using the word *hope* and did not ask for advice directly or refer to the coach as an adviser.

The third occurrence of complaining was even more face threatening than the second. The initial complaint, which was expressed as disappointment, was now a threat to the coach's professional status. The analysis showed that the coach disregarded the essence of the complaint and did not address the client's desire for suggestions. The second occurrence of the complaint did not receive an explicit response from the coach. Thus, after one unsatisfying response and one nonresponse, the complaint was inflated to a severe critique of online counseling, leaving the client with the feeling that she had no support.

## Discussion

In this article, we have shown how clients package their complaints about online counseling in email contact with their coaches or counselors. In particular, we highlighted three aspects: (a) the use of redressive design features in the complaint formulation, (b) how complaints might be directed at the medium (rather than the counselor), and (c) how counselors used different strategies to deal with a complaint. The first aspect shows that the management of face is as important in email interaction as in speaking. The complaints, however, took a different form in email than in spoken interaction. In spoken interaction, the delicate nature of complaining is managed turn by turn. In online counseling, because the complaint might be expressed in one single email, face was not managed sequentially but rather preemptively in its design.

Regarding the second aspect, we found that the complaints in Extracts 1 and 3 were ascribed to the medium of email. Some of these are known characteristics of email (no nonverbal communication, not being able to see the type of person that the coparticipant represents), but most of them are not necessarily related to email. The impersonal writing style of coach emails (e.g., it is not a real conversation, emails have the same tone all the time and come across as enormously impersonal and distant) is not an inherent feature of emails (cf. private email communication). The complaint "I can almost draft the answer mail that comes back myself" (Extract 3) might have been related to how the coaches were trained to summarize the client's writing. We suggest that examining in more detail how this summarizing is done and identifying the effect of mirroring back the client's own formulations would be a worthwhile endeavor.

The complaints related to the relative anonymity of the coach (i.e., not knowing whom I have in front of me; you can't see what type of person I am; I have no idea whether you are a fictitious person, and so forth) were also avoidable characteristics of email counseling because coaches (and clients) could use avatars or other means to share personal photos. Because the clients ascribed the complaints to the medium and the coaches confirmed this perception in our study, the complaints might be used as reasons to end counseling and/or to not seek online counseling in the future. This would threaten the acceptance of online counseling as an appropriate way of getting help and its potential success.

The third aspect we investigated is how coaches dealt with complaints. We found that coaches, in different ways, did not take responsibility for the complaints, and

we suggest that it is possible that dropout rates could be reduced if counselors would take some sort of responsibility for their clients' complaints. This would strengthen the counseling relationship and possibly also health outcomes. Moreover, if we compare the results of studies of customer service encounters, we find that appropriate responses to complaints can positively influence a customer's loyalty (cf. Bolkan & Daly, 2009). In our study, the complaints indicated that the clients were not satisfied with the counseling, which could have been an indication that dropout was imminent. Thus, a response that does not deflect or that merely mirrors the client's own words could possibly remove dissatisfaction and ensure the client's participation.

On the basis of our analysis, we suggest that the following steps might help prevent client dropout: (a) clear identification of coaches and their qualifications; and (b) at the beginning of the counseling experience, an explicit mention of the medium of counseling and the consequences for interaction. How coaches respond to complaints might also be influential. The design and evolution of complaints in online counseling (via chat or email) should be addressed in future studies.

## Notes

1. The definition of counseling we use is Longman's dictionary (Summers, 2003): advice and support given by a counselor to someone with problems, usually after talking to them.
2. We treat email threads as discrete units for interaction analysis. Similarly, Harris et al. (2012) analyzed email threads between two participants as interactional email threads.
3. There was a cost to using the evaluation format. The coach did not ask for an evaluation in her preceding message. Rather, because it was the coach's task to organize the interaction by initiating topics and activities such as evaluations, the evaluation was not only redressive but also face threatening.

4. We use the terms *subjective* and *objective* more loosely than Wiggins and Potter (2003), who reserved the term *subjective* for utterances such as "I (x) cheese" and "objective" for "the cheese is (x)." When the syntactic subject of the assessing proposition is "it," we call it an objective assessment, and when it is "I," we call it subjective. The objective/subjective distinction is not applicable to the claims "don't know who I have in front of me" and "you can't see what type of person I am," because, linguistically speaking, they were not assessments. These claims were constructed as facts rather than opinions/assessments as "I don't like it that I don't know who I have in front of me" and "I don't like it that you can't see what type of person I am." However, because they were embedded in the complaint (through conjunctions "also" and "and" [line (L) 5]) and the negations ("don't know," "can't see"), they "express feelings of discontent" (Heinemann & Traverso, 2009) and should be considered implicit negative assessments.
5. Note that the client's expression "very impersonal" is downgraded to "quite impersonal," which slightly diminishes the complaint.
6. Using categories such as "psychologist" (L 7) as self-constructions is a known way of legitimizing claims and actions (e.g., Stommel, 2010). Note that the adjective "clinical" placed even more emphasis on the professional status of the category "psychologist" and, therefore, strengthened the legitimization. The same can be noted for "in 2006," inferring that she had been a psychologist for 3 years and distinguishing her clearly from still being a student. Altogether, this sentence contributed to the coach's own positive face needs.

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