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## **Declining to help. Rejections in service requests to the police**

Kari Rønneberg & Jan Svennevig

### **Abstract**

A major part of police work consists in providing services and information to the general public. A stated goal of such police work is to be service-minded and contribute to a positive encounter. This article analyses service requests in calls to the duty desk of a large police station and focuses on how officers deal with requests that have to be rejected. It reveals a general pattern in which officers produce the rejection in a dispreferred format and include displays of empathy, accounts for the rejection and suggestions for alternative solutions. However, in certain types of requests the rejections are not infrequently produced in a direct and unmitigated fashion, without accounts or explanations. This is especially notable in requests that touch upon institutional constraints, such as professional secrecy. And in certain cases the rejections are even delivered in an aggravated form, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to the legitimacy of the request. These rejections cast the caller in an oppositional role, infringing the professional constraints of the police. However, the constraints in question may not be accessible to the callers. The officers will consequently be experienced as hostile and will subvert their own objectives of showing service-mindedness.

Keywords: rejections, requests, service interaction, service-mindedness, police communication, telephone calls, preference organization, conflict

## Biographies

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Jan Svennevig is Professor of Linguistics and Communication at the University of Oslo, Norway. His research focuses on interaction in business meetings and in social work consultations. His publications include *Getting acquainted in conversation* (John Benjamins 1999), “Trying the easiest solution first in other-initiation of repair” (*Journal of Pragmatics* 2008) and “Meeting talk – an introduction” (with Birte Asmuss, *Journal of Business Communication* 2009).

## **Declining to help. Rejections in service requests to the police**

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### **Introduction**

The everyday encounter between the police and the general public, accomplished through the exchange of talk between a police officer and a citizen, has not often been the object of systematic linguistic research. While quite extensive research has been done on police language in structured and goal-oriented situations, such as police interviews and calls to emergency centres: cf. Jönsson (1988), Jönsson & Linell (1996), Whalen & Zimmerman (1987), Manning (1988), Whalen & Zimmerman (1990), Zimmerman (1992), few empirical studies have been done of the talk-in-interaction in the everyday encounters between the police and the citizens, and of the way the linguistic and interactional choices of the police may affect their relationship with the public.

However, the fact remains that the main bulk of ordinary police work consists of patrolling and answering calls, which puts the officers in daily contact with ordinary citizens. During such encounters, conversation not only provides an important means to solve problems and exert social control, but also to build relations and inspire confidence and trust. The latter is of the utmost importance, as successful police work is linked not only to people's voluntary cooperation with the police, reporting about crime and suspicious events and accepting to testify in court, but also to their willingness to obey police regulations and decisions and comply with the law in general, cf. Tyler & Huo (2002), Tyler (2006). In Norway, the goal of building positive relations with the general public is explicitly stated in several types of written guidelines for police service. For instance, the instructions for work on the duty desk state that "The officers manning the counter are the face which the police station presents to the world, thus service-

mindfulness is expected” (authors’ translation) (Source: Internal instructions for the duty desk at a major Oslo police station, undated). In a wider perspective, a stated objective of the Norwegian Police Directorate in its Strategic Plan for 2006-2009 is how ”the public’s encounter with the police should be positive”.

This article reports on interactions between police and citizens in calls to the duty desk of a large police station, cf. Rønneberg (2009). The focus of analysis is how the officers fulfil their communicative role as service providers. An especially challenging communicative task is singled out for analysis, namely rejecting requests for information or service. Many requests fall outside the scope of police work or have to be rejected due to a shortage of resources. In such cases, rejections have to be given, but the way they are formulated may vary considerably. And this will be an especially relevant place to investigate how police officers orient to their role as service providers. The analysis thus aims at describing the interactional practices employed in the formulation of such rejections and their consequences for the social relations between the officer and the caller. This will contribute not only to describing a type of social action in a particular kind of public service work but also to evaluating to what degree the police actually live up to the stated objectives of showing service-mindedness.

The data for the present study is drawn from a total of 900 telephone calls from the public to a 24-hour duty desk of an Oslo police station during two different periods during 2002 and 2003. A representative sample of 190 conversations has been selected for analysis and transcribed according to the principles of Conversation Analysis (CA) (see Appendix for information about transcription conventions). The calls involve a range of diversified tasks, from requests for information, advice and assistance to reports about various events ranging from minor incidents to observations of accidents, suspicious events and committed offenses. The calls studied here all involve some sort of request from the caller, either for information or for some service.

Such calls to the police, either through the number 02800 or as direct calls to the various police stations, should not be confused with the emergency number 112, which deals with acute calls for assistance. The data of this present study, then, only consist of recordings of calls to the duty desk, not to the emergency number. However, often the citizens themselves are not aware of what qualifies as a “real” need for police assistance, and may just as often call the emergency number instead of calling the police in general. Thus, both lines – 112 and 02800 – may get the

same mixture of calls, which then have to be sorted out by the operators and redirected to the appropriate recipient.

### **Rejections as social actions**

In ordinary conversation rejections clearly constitute dispreferred actions, cf. Sacks (1987), and are generally formulated in a dispreferred format, including initial pausing and hesitation, delay of the rejection proper, mitigated formulation of the rejection component, and presentation of accounts, cf. Pomerantz (1984). However, the norms of interpersonal alignment in ordinary conversation cannot automatically be considered as applicable to institutional interaction. The officers who present the rejection are not personally responsible for the decision, but merely representatives of an institution which is the ultimate source of the rejection (the “principal” in Goffman’s (1981) terms). Furthermore, the institutional role of the officer prescribes a neutralistic stance, cf. Drew & Heritage (1992), which implies restrictions on expressing personal emotions and reactions concerning the issue at hand. Consequently, the formulation of rejections has to be studied in relation to the institutional context at hand, and the possibly dispreferred status of rejections is open to empirical investigation rather than a theoretical premise.

Ascertaining the preference status of a social action such as a rejection cannot be done by analyzing only the action itself in isolation. To which degree a social action is considered affiliative or hostile by the participants is only possible to ascertain by analyzing the reactions and responses to it. Furthermore, requests may in their formulation display various degrees of expectation of the request being granted or rejected and thus preemptively display their analysis of the (dis-)preferred character of the response. All this calls for a sequential analysis that takes into account the way rejections are both shaped by reference to the request and responded to by the interlocutor.

Requests are formulated in ways that display the speakers’ understanding of their entitlement to make it and contingencies associated with the recipient’s ability to grant it. For instance, a request format that displays a high degree of entitlement to make the request is the negative interrogative (“Can’t you...”), cf. Heinemann (2006). And, according to Curl & Drew (2008), requests formulated with modal auxiliaries, such as “Can/Could you...”, present the

request as unproblematic and non-contingent. By contrast, requests taking the form “I wonder if...” display an awareness of contingencies associated with the request being granted, such as the speaker’s right to make the request, the addressee’s ability (or willingness) to grant it, or the availability of the service requested. Thus, a request format that displays high contingency may be considered as proactively orienting to a potential rejection – and thereby mitigating the negative implications of it. This implies that non-complying responses are less dispreferred in such environments, cf. Heinemann (2006:1102).

The grammatical form of a request may also involve varying degrees of constraints on the response options. For instance, in a study of requests in a copy centre Vinkhuyzen & Szymanski (2005) show that requests in the form of a statement of need or desire (such as “I’d like to make three copies of this”) allow the interlocutor to treat the request as a request for advice and thereby to reject the request in a preferred format by suggesting that they go to the “do-it-yourself-area”. Requests in the form of an inquiry about willingness or capability to do the service (“Can you make two copies of this document?”) are more constraining and require the interlocutor to produce a dispreferred response in suggesting that they do it themselves. Thus, rejections need to be studied according to how constraining the grammatical form of the request is and what opportunities it gives the interlocutor to avoid direct rejections and dispreferred formats.

A theoretical framework for studying reactions to rejections can be found in Schegloff’s (2007) account of third-position receipts and Couper-Kuhlen’s (2009) study of displays of affect in rejection sequences. Schegloff (2007:127f) notes that different receipt tokens are used for different types of actions. An “oh” is typically a receipt of information, whereas “okay” is a receipt of other types of actions, such as declinations of invitations. A rejection may thus be responded to by a composite third-position receipt, such as “oh. okay”, the first registering receipt of information, the second acceptance of the rejection. The absence of an action-accepting third-position token such as “okay” may thus signal less than full acceptance and thus only partially signal sequence closure. Of interest to our topic is also Schegloff’s (2007:117) observation that negative (“-“) second pair parts are in general expansion relevant.

Couper-Kuhlen’s (2009) study shows how affects are expressed in receipts of rejections and what sorts of reactions such expressions engender. She notes that a rejection will most commonly be followed by an expression of acceptance of the rejection, a *rejection finalizer* such as “okay”, “ah alright” or “oh I see”. In producing such receipts the speakers may prosodically

display various affects. For instance, a rejection finalizer produced with falling intonation and low volume will display disappointment and resignation, whereas the same words produced with rising intonation and high volume may display such affects as surprise or even annoyance.

An alternative to producing rejection finalizers is to restrict oneself to silence or weak agreement tokens. According to Couper-Kuhlen such reactions suggest that the response so far is incomplete or insufficient in some way, and they thus open for negotiating the proposal or request and the terms of its acceptance.

Displays of disappointment vs. surprise give rise to different reactions by the producer of the rejection. Disappointment is generally met by actions that compensate for the rejection, such as apologies, offers of consolation, explanations or advice about alternative solutions. After displays of surprise, by contrast, the receiver of the rejection will generally expand by accounting for the reason for the request. And the producer of the rejection will not offer compensatory actions of the types described above.

In the analysis below, we start by analyzing rejections of service requests that are mitigated and performed as dispreferred actions. These are then contrasted with rejections that are formulated in an unmitigated way, and finally, with so-called aggravated rejections, where the formulation of the rejection conveys an explicit or implicit criticism of the caller's right to make the request.

### **Rejections in dispreferred format**

As noted above, rejections are dispreferred – and hence *accountable* – actions. Most rejections in the data are presented in a dispreferred format, including delay of the rejection proper, mitigation of the declination component, and most notably, accounts for the reason why the request is turned down. Accounts are actions that deal with the legitimacy of an action, and are typically used when people “have to convey bad news about events for which they may potentially be held responsible”, cf. Linell (1998: 228). The reasons presented for declining requests are mainly that they touch upon institutional constraints, such as definitions of police relevance, procedural requirements etc. We will now look at some examples of requests that are turned down due to violation of such constraints.



In the following example, a woman is calling to report continuous harassment over a period of four years by a former boyfriend. Prior to the excerpt, she has reported that he has been calling, threatening her, and even setting fire to her garbage bin.

(1) (0627023)

1 C: og nå bynner jeg å bli 'drittlei,  
1 and now I'm getting just 'plain fed 'up,  
2 (.)  
3 P: Ja 'det forstår jeg 'veldig godt,  
3 Yes that I understand very well,  
4 C: og::: 'uansett hva jeg 'gjør så 'stopper han ikke,  
4 and::: what'ever I do he doesn't 'stop,  
5 (.)  
6 P: Nei.  
6 No.  
7 (0.7)  
8 C: 'er:: det 'n::oen som 'kan::::: >'dra til< ham?  
8 'is:: there 'an::yone who 'can::::: >'go to him?  
9 (0.2)  
10 C: [Han er (en)  
10 [He is (a)  
11 P: [Det:: 'altså  
11 [It:: that 'is  
12 P: har du 'anmeldt ham for 'dette 'her?  
12 have you 'filed a com'plaint about 'this?  
13 (0.7)  
14 C: Eh .hh nei 'egentlig 'ikke,  
14 Eh .hh no not 'really,  
15 P: [nei  
15 [no  
16 C: [fordi 'faren hans 'er:: (0.8) ((yrke slettet)),  
16 [because his 'father 'is:: (0.8) ((profession deleted))  
17 og jeg 'trodde det ville [( )  
17 and I 'thought that would ( )  
18 P: [å ja,

18 *oh right,*

19 *det::: 'spiller ingen rolle 'det,*  
 19 *that::: doesn't 'matter at 'all,*

20 P: *hadde jeg vært 'deg så ville jeg 'anmeldt og*  
 20 *if I were 'you I would have 'filed a com'plaint and*

21 *det blir IKke gjort no 'med det før du 'anmeldern. .hhhhh*  
 21 *Nothing will be 'done about it until you report it. .hhhhh*

22 C: *'Mhm,*

23 P: *(.) må 'foreligge en 'krimi<nalsak> før poli'tiet 'gjør=*  
 23 *(.) there has to be a 'criminal case before the po'lice 'do=*

24 *=no vet du.*  
 24 *=anything you know.*

25 *(0.6)*

26 C: *'o 'key.*  
 26 *'oh 'kay.*

27 *(0.4)*

28 P: *så::: hvis 'han 'virkelig har 'holdt på med 'sånt,*  
 28 *so::: if 'he 'really has been 'doing things like 'that,*

29 *så ville jeg ikke 'nøle med 'det.*  
 29 *I wouldn't 'hesitate to do so.*

After the reporting is concluded by a strong evaluation (l. 1), the request for help is formulated in line 8. It takes the form of a question about available resources, thus orienting to a contingency that may prevent it being granted (that there might not be personnel available). The request is not immediately responded to, and the ensuing silence is taken by the caller as possibly projecting a dispreferred response, as evidenced by the fact that she initiates a new turn constructional unit, probably bolstering the request by additional information (l. 10). Simultaneously, the officer starts formulating a rather hesitating response (l. 11), with initial components which are also typical of a dispreferred turn shape in that the response proper is delayed, in this case possibly by the officer's surprise at the unconventional request. The first word is not a type-conforming response word, but an elongated formal subject ("det::/it::"). This is then broken off and a reformulation marker ("altså/that is") introduces a new construction type. This is not the response proper either, but the introduction of an insertion sequence, a pre-second signalling that the answer is contingent on more information. Since the answer to the inserted question is negative

(line 14), the negative outcome of the original request is thereby already foreshadowed. After an expansion of the insertion sequence, an increment explaining why she has not filed a complaint, the rejection is produced at line 20-21. This does not take the form of an explicit rejection but instead a piece of advice (to file a complaint) and an account for what happens if she doesn't (nothing). This is further legitimized by a reference to a general "rule" about police work (l. 23), which is presented as common knowledge accessible to the caller ("vet du/you know"). Turning the negative response into a piece of advice mitigates the negative character of the response by formatting it as a partly positive one and thereby avoiding a dispreferred action, cf. Vinkhuyzen & Szymanski (2005).

Turning the rejection into a piece of advice makes relevant not just a rejection finalizer but also a response to the advice. Requests for future action are not granted by minimal response tokens alone but normally require an independent statement of intent of carrying it out in order to be heard as accepting, cf. Lindström (1999). This type of response is absent, and instead there is just a minimal acknowledgement token occurring after a rather long silence. That this is understood by the officer as resisting the advice (and maybe also the rejection) is evidenced by the fact that he repeats the advice, this time in a more insistent way (line 28).

In addition to the dispreference markers found here we can also note other features of the officer's response that work to minimize the negative implications of the rejection. First and foremost there are displays of personal affiliation. Already in line 3, after the caller's emphatic assessment, he volunteers a display of empathy, which is not indexical of his institutional role (prescribing a neutralistic stance) or the institutional activity (dealing with the legal problem) but rather of an interpersonal role as recipient of a troubles-telling, cf. Jefferson and Lee (1992). Also the advice given in two rounds is both times presented as a personal rather than an institutional recommendation: "If I were you..." (l. 20). He even extends this perspective to the point that he refers to the institution he represents by a third person reference term: "...before *the police* do anything" (l. 23). All of this creates a personal rather than an institutional perspective on the matter-at-hand and compensates for the negative response by showing empathy and offering help.

Another reason for rejecting a request is that it is not treated as police relevant. In the following example, a New Year's Eve reveler reports being threatened by a neighbor, who claims that the caller's fireworks have damaged his apartment. One of the problems the caller reports is that he is not allowed to enter the apartment to inspect the damage.

## (2) (0301039)

1 C: [og han sier han skal ha 'syv tusen kroner 'her og 'nå  
 1 *[and he says he wants 'seven 'thousand 'kroner 'on the spot*

2 ellers \*så :::: kommer han til å 'anmelde oss.  
 2 *if not \*then:::: he's going to 'file a com'plaint against us.*

3 (0.3)

4 P: ja så du 'lurer på 'hva:::: 'hva du skal 'gjøre?  
 4 *right so you 'wonder 'what:::: 'what to 'do?*

5 (0.6)

6 C: heh ja: heh hva (.) skal jeg han (.) han:::: 'e jo 'helt (.) i::::  
 6 *heh yeah: heh what (.) should I he (.) he:::: 'is 'quite (.)i::::*

7 (0.8) [(ikke )  
 7 (0.8) [(not )

8 P: [nei det er (0.3) det::: 'er litt eh g- 'småvanskelig  
 8 *[no it is (0.3) it::: 'is a bit eh g- 'difficult*

9 det der der sånn for det er ikke noen poli'tisak i hvertfall,  
 9 *that thing because it's not a 'police matter in any case,*

10 vi kan 'ikke komme og så:::::::::: (0.2) 'se og 'gjøre noe her,  
 10 *we can 'not come and:::::::::: (0.2) 'look and 'do anything here,*

11 så det er det 'e noe dere må 'prøve å lø[se  
 11 *so that is that 'is something you have to try to solve*

12 C: ['kan ikke dere  
 12 *'can't you*

13 (.) se (.) ska:::: (.) eh 'se på 'skadene og:::: (.)  
 13 *(.)look (.)dam:::: (.) eh 'look at the 'damage and:::: (.)*

14 P: nei altså 'vi:: 'nå på 'nyttårsaften (.) så 'har vi  
 14 *no you see 'we:: 'now on New Year's 'eve (.) we 'have*

15 'mer enn nok 'annet å gjøre.  
 15 *'more than enough of 'other things to do.*

16 (0.7)

17 P: det 'her blir dette 'er en kon'flikt mellom eh 'deg og så en  
 17 *this is this 'is a 'conflict between eh 'you and a*

18 'nabo på en måte,  
 18 *'neighbour in a 'way,*

19 (0.5)

20 P: det [ekke noe:: det ikke no  
20 it isn't a:: it isn't a

21 C: [mhm,

22 P: (.) det 'er i utgangspunktet 'ikke no poli'tisak.  
22 (.) *basically it's 'not a police matter.*

23 (0.6)

24 P: og ['da:::::::::::  
24 and 'then:::::::::::

25 C: [mhm,

26 P: 'nå (.)så har vi i 'hvert fall IKKE noen 'mulighet til å 'gjøre  
26 'now (.) in 'any case we have NO possibility to 'do

27 no med 'det,  
27 anything about 'it.

The request for help is never formulated by the caller, but instead anticipated by the officer. His formulation of it is that the caller is “wondering what to do”. This formulation construes the reason for the call as a request for advice rather than a request for service. The officer denies that the police can help him in line 10 but the rejection is prefaced by two accounts for why it cannot be granted, the first possibly referring to the resource situation (being “a bit difficult”) and the second referring to the institutional irrelevance of the request, not being a “police matter”.

In this example the rejection is not immediately accepted by the caller. He interrupts the rejection in line 12 by a revised request. This request is made more compelling in that he now produces an explicit request and formats it as a negative interrogative (“can’t you”), a form that displays high entitlement and low contingency, cf. Heinemann (2006). Furthermore, he preempts a potential reason for rejection by reducing the range of the service to just an inspection of the damage. This request is also rejected, and here the resource situation is explicitly claimed to be the reason. This rejection is again resisted, this time by silence, as the 0.7 seconds pause in l. 16 indicates. This prompts a new account by the officer, now focusing on the lack of police relevance (l. 17-18). The caller produces weak acknowledgement tokens at line 20 and 25, although both times they are delayed so much that the officer has already started reformulating the rejection in other words.

In this extract the rejection is more directly formulated than in the previous example but again the declination component is delayed. The practice used here is to start by prefaces

motivating and accounting for the forthcoming rejection. And when the rejection is met by resistance, the officer orients to this by offering more accounts and explanations.

A third class of rejections is the ones that are due to professional secrecy of the police in criminal cases. In some cases, friends and relatives of persons who have been brought into custody call to inquire about their whereabouts. In such cases, the police are not in position to give out information about the custodian. The problem of not being able to answer may be solved by accounting for why this is so, as in the following example:

(3) (0525023)

1 C: .hhh jeg 'ringer 'angående 'mamman 'min.  
1 .hh I am 'calling about my 'mom.

2 (0.9)

3 P: Mhm,  
4 (0.4)

5 C: Og:: jeg 'ringer på (.) 'er hun 'oppe hos 'dere?  
5 And:: I'm 'calling at (.) 'is she 'there with 'you?

6 (1.8) ((Silence, then scraping sounds))

7 P: Eh::::::::::::m (0.6) 'det 'veit ei-kje.  
7 Eh::::::::::::m (0.6)'that I don't 'know.

8 '↓hvorfør >'skulle ho være< 'det,  
8 '↓why >'should she< be,

9 (0.3)

10 C: 'Hva?  
10 'What?

11 (0.5)

12 P: 'Hvorfor 'skulle ho være 'det?  
12 'Why 'should she be?

13 (0.4)

14 C: Det er poli'tiet som har 'tott henne va: non 'fulle,  
14 It is the po'lice who 'took her were some 'drunk people

15 (0.6) som 'bråkte 'uti (0.4) ((XX))veien,  
15 (0.6) who made noise out in (0.4) ((XX)) road,

16 (1.5)

17 P: ja 'ha,  
17 *all right,*

18 (0.3)

19 C: og hun het (1.0) ((navn)).  
19 *and her name was (1.0) ((name)).*

20 (.)

21 P: ja.  
21 *yes.*

22 (0.5)

23 P: Du 'vet at æ 'har 'uansett ikkje 'lov å 'opplyse 'hvem  
23 *You 'know that 'anyway I'm not 'allowed to inform about 'who*

24 *vi \*'har hos 'oss eller 'ik[kje.*  
24 *we \*'have with 'us or 'not.*

25 C: [men jeg 'vet 'det.  
25 *but I 'know 'that.*

26 (.)

27 C: jeg jeg kjenner 'til ( ).  
27 *I I 'know about ( ).*

28 (.)

29 C: .hh skal dere ['holde henne 'lenge?  
29 *.hh will you be ['keeping her for a 'long time?*

The direct question in line 5 is not modified by modal markers and thus does not display any reservation about the caller's right to ask the question or uncertainty about the officer's ability or willingness to answer. The question gives rise to a long silence followed by a very long filled pause and a new silence. These signs of trouble lead up to a claim of ignorance and the initiation of an insertion sequence in the form of a pre-second requesting more information about the reason for asking. When this has been clarified the initial request for information is addressed again by the officer. She implicitly rejects the request by referring to regulations forbidding her to give out such information. The rejection contains the word "uansett/anyway" which reconfirms the claim presented earlier that she in fact does not know whether or not the person is in police custody (l. 7). This is exploited by the caller to disattend to the principled rejection and orient to the knowledge claim. She assures the officer that *she* does know that her mother is with the police, thus countering the rejection and reactualizing the initial request. When this is not taken up by the officer she produces a reformulated request (l. 29), this time presupposing that the

mother is there. In spite of the officer's explicit denial of being able to tell, the question is again formulated directly and unmodalized, thus displaying a low contingency of rejection.

In the response to this request (not shown here for reasons of space), the officer denies this by telling the caller that there are no persons in custody at the police station where she is and that all detainees are brought to a central prison elsewhere. This leads to yet another request:

(4) (0525023)

1 C: Men jeg 'lurer på kan du 'sjekke det hvis hun blei 'ut  
1 *But I 'wonder can you check and see if she is let 'out*

2 eller (0.2) skal dere'holde henne.  
2 *or (0.2) are you going to 'keep her.*

3 (0.9)

4 P: men det 'har-kje jeg 'lov å ↑'si noen ting til deg så  
4 *but that I am 'not allowed to ↑'say anything about to you so*

5 jeg har'taushetsplikt.  
5 *this is confidential.*

6 (0.2)

7 C: .hhhh har du 'taushetsplikt.  
7 *.hhh is it confi'dential.*

8 P: ja.  
8 *yes.*

9 for når når 'noen 'kommer når 'noen blir 'tatt  
9 *because when when 'someone comes when 'someone is 'brought 'in*

10 av poli'tiet, og: skal settes inn i arr'est,  
10 *by the poli'ce, and: is to be ar'rested,*

11 (0.3) .hhhhh så s: 'spør vi dem 'alltid om det er 'noen  
11 *(0.3) .hhhh then s: we always 'ask them if there is 'anybody*

12 vi eh dem 'ønsker vi skal 'varsle.  
12 *we eh they 'want us to 'notify.*

13 (0.8)

14 Og hvis 'så ikkje vi hører om vi skal 'varsle noen,  
14 *And if 'so we do 'not hear that we are to 'notify anybody,*

15 så (.) \*eh >'sier ikkje vi no ( )< 'harkje 'lov  
15 *then (.) \*eh >we do't 'say anything( )< aren't all'owed*

16 å for'telle deg om 'ho 'e (her) eller 'ikkje.  
16 *to tell you if 'she 'is (here) or 'not.*



17 (1.0)  
 18 C: >(så) du kan-ke fortelle meg 'det.<  
 18 >(so) you can't tell me 'this.<  
 19 P: (0.2) nei, har-kje 'lov til det.  
 19 (0.2) no, I'm 'not all'owed to.

Here again the officer stresses the regulations as the cause of her not being able to tell, thus placing the responsibility for the decision outside of her command. When the caller displays some surprise at this answer (l. 7) the officer provides an extensive and detailed explanation of the procedures. The elaborateness of this explanation is a display of willingness to provide information and thus further underlines her willingness to help. And again at the end of the excerpt, she self-repairs and reformulates the rejection from “we don’t say anything” to “are not allowed to tell you” (lines 15-16).

In the examples above then, the officers produce their rejections in a dispreferred turn shape. They account for the reasons for turning down the request, and they provide various types of displays of consideration for the negative implications for the caller and willingness to help. All these features correspond to the way dispreferred actions are produced in informal conversation. Especially the personal tone in some of the expressions of sympathy seems to go against the expectation that institutional agents are normatively oriented towards taking a neutralistic stance. Here, instead, they quite often display personal feelings and reactions to the problems of the callers. Instead of interpreting this as being “out of character” we might rather think of it as a strategic exploitation of certain resources from informal conversation for the attainment of institutional goals, cf. Drew & Heritage (1992:28), Svennevig (2001). The personal feelings displayed are not just any type of personal reaction, but only ones that contribute to compensating for the negative response and showing concern for the caller’s situation. This may thus be interpreted as an orientation towards meeting the caller in a positive manner, and thus as showing “service-mindedness”.

Sacks (1987) notes that a consequence of the preference for agreement is a “dispreference for disagreements”, which may lead to the avoidance of the word “no”. Instead, one may replace it by other responses that are not direct rejection components, such as “Well, I don’t know”. In the cases above, this may be observed in that the rejection is most often implicit and implied by

explanations and accounts. In the next section, however, rejections are formulated directly and explicitly, and without accompanying mitigating actions.

### Unmitigated rejections

As already noted, an interesting finding is that while rejections are almost always given in a dispreferred format in the case of the routine requests, it is within the category of calls which concern institutional constraints that we find the exceptions to the rule. This can be seen in the following example, where the caller wants help from the police to have his lost mobile phone blocked. Such a request does not qualify as a police matter and is consequently rejected by the officer. However, the caller has explained his reasons for calling, which is that he is unable to get through to the company in charge.

(5) (0302009)

1 C: og: 'det er bare 'det .hhh heh hh.  
1 an:d 'it is just 'that .hhh heh hh.

2 så: jeg 'vet ikke om du kan hjelpe meg med 'det eller 'ikke,  
2 so: I don't 'know if you can help me with 'this or 'not,

3 for å få det 'sperra,  
3 to have it 'blocked.

4 (1.4)

5 P: 'nei jeg 'får ikke 'hjelpa deg med 'det,  
5 'no I 'cannot help you with 'that,

6 (0.2)

7 C: du 'får ikke 'det?  
7 you 'can't do 'that?

8 (0.3)

9 P: nhhei,  
9 nhho,

10 (0.2)

11 C: 'ing (.) du 'får ikke gjort 'noen 'ting?  
11 'no (.) you 'can't do 'any'thing?

12 (0.9)

13 P: nei 'jeg fåkke 'gjort no (.) t- eh ::  
 13 no 'I can't do any (.) th- eh::

14 du får 'ta kon'takt med opera'tøren din?  
 14 you better 'contact your 'operator?

The format of the request indicates low entitlement and high contingency, both by the weak modality (“I don’t know whether you can help me”) and by the fact that he formats it as an alternative question: ”or not” (line 2), thus presenting it as a tentative inquiry rather than a request. The long silence that follows suggests that something is problematic. The response – when it finally comes – is negative, and it is given directly with the use of the word “no” and without any accounts or other mitigating actions. On the contrary, it is expanded by a statement that echoes the question (“I cannot help you with that”). Such “echo answers” are conventionally used to heighten the speaker’s commitment to the emotional stance expressed in the answer, cf. Svennevig (2003). Here this amounts to reinforcing the negative stance and thus sharpening rather than mitigating the rejection.

The caller reacts to the answer by a questioning repeat (line 7), a type of post-expansion which may display surprise and invite further elaboration of the answer – in this case an account or an explanation, see Schegloff (2007), Svennevig (2004). However, no such elaboration is given, just a minimal confirmation of the rejection (“no” in line 9). This is followed by yet another request for confirmation (l. 11), this time in the form of an understanding check which radicalizes the rejection (“you can’t do *anything*?”). This is again responded to with a negative response word and an echo answer, and only after this does the officer provide something beyond rejection components, namely a suggestion to contact the operator (l. 13).

As we can see, this direct and unmitigated rejection is not responded to by receipts indicating acceptance (rejection finalizers) but rather by post-expansions which request confirmation of the claim. This is a practice which delays closure of the adjacency pair and gives interlocutors the opportunity to revise their response or expand on it. It may thus be considered a way of resisting the rejection and opening for further negotiation of it, cf. Couper-Kuhlen (2009), cited above. The fact that the caller expresses surprise and resists the rejection provides evidence that the answer is experienced as not fully expectable or maybe even inappropriate. This suggests that the norms of preference are expected to apply here, by the caller at least, since he treats the answer as somewhat “deviant”.

When looking more closely at other calls belonging to the category of requests about matters that are not police relevant, we find that similar direct and unmitigated rejections are not uncommon. In addition to matters that are not police relevant, such as in the example above, we also frequently find such rejections in requests that touch upon professional secrecy. A third type of case is with repeated requests. Occasionally, the caller keeps arguing his or her case, and this is almost without exception followed by repeated rejections by the officer, thus confirming the pattern noted by Couper-Kuhlen (2009). The following excerpt is taken from a conversation in which the caller wants information about a man that she fears is trying to entice a friend into investing her money in some dubious financial schemes. She has previously been denied information about the case, but here she makes another attempt.

(6) (0302025)

1 C: [men men har du 'ikke 'lov til å si u ( ) til 'meg om  
1 *but aren't you allowed to tell u ( ) to 'me whether*

2 'hva han er 'anmeldt (0.4) for 'før?  
2 *'what he has been reported (0.4) for be'fore?*

3 C: er [han  
3 *is [he*

4 P: ['nei jeg KAN ikke 'det,  
4 *['no I CANnot do 'that,*

5 C: kan du 'si at han 'er anmeldt 'før?  
5 *can you say that he 'has been reported be'fore?*

6 (0.4)

7 C: for det 'sa han poli'timann[en,  
7 *because that was what he 'said this po'liceman*

8 P: ['ja: hvis du har fått 'vite  
8 *['yes: if you've been 'told*

9 det 'før så::::(0.6) ((pustelyder)) >så kan jeg< ikke  
9 *be'fore then:::: (0.6) ((breathing)) >then I can< not*

10 si at han 'ikke ble [det,  
10 *say that he has 'not [been,*

The question here is formulated with reference to the prior rejection (“but aren’t you allowed to...”) and modifies the request for information to a less encompassing question. She also tries to make it easier for the officer to produce an answer without saying much himself by starting to present candidate answers herself (l. 3: “is he..”). However, the response is a direct rejection in the form of a negative response word and an expansion in the form of an echo answer. The caller continues to revise her request by further reducing the amount of information requested, and this time bolstering it with reference to the fact that she has already gotten this information from another police officer. This time the officer complies, although he does so with manifest signs and expressions of reluctance.

The short and direct form of rejections after repeated requests seems to treat the revised request as a challenge to the initial rejection and thus potentially as lack of respect for the officer’s professional authority. Continuous argumentation by the caller after a rejection might be felt as undue pressure and be interpreted as implicit criticism of the other’s judgement.

In conclusion, there are three types of requests that are frequently responded to by unmitigated rejections, namely requests that are not police matters, which touch upon questions of professional secrecy and repeated requests. In some cases, such as (5) above, the direct rejection is treated as inadequate or inappropriate and thus resisted and questioned by the caller. In others, such as (6), the unmitigated form seems on the contrary to treat the *request* as illegitimate or inappropriate and thus functions as a reproach. However, the reason why the request is considered illegitimate may not always be accessible to the caller but rather constitute a constraint of the institutional regulations.

A closer scrutiny of calls touching on institutional constraints showed several examples of rejections given in a direct, unmitigated format. When examining 32 such calls, picked at random, we found only four instances where expressions of regret such as “sorry” or “I regret” were used, while a total of 24 instances were direct refusals without any mitigating expressions. Also, out of the 32 calls, in 8 of them no account at all was given for the rejection. In cases such as these, the role of service-provider is backgrounded in favour of a role as gatekeeper. The officers do not seem to live up to their own ideals of showing service-mindedness and contributing to creating a “positive encounter” for the public. Furthermore, the callers seem to treat these rejections as unexpected by displaying surprise and as inadequate or inappropriate by reinitiating their request. An explanation for the direct and unmitigated form of these rejections

may be that the requests touch on institutional constraints and thus may be experienced by the officers as somehow challenging their authority or professional discretion. We will return to this discussion in the final section.

### Aggravated rejections

Minimal and unmitigated rejections are face-threatening in the sense that they don't show respect for the concerns and interests of the caller. However, there are instances in the corpus that have an even more hostile character, in that the rejection in addition includes some explicit or implicit criticism of the caller's request. This criticism mostly concerns the legitimacy of the call, but may also reveal an underlying suspicion concerning the caller's motives for making it.

Explanations are most often used as a dispreference device to mitigate the rejection, but there are also instances where they are used with the opposite effect, that is, to display the illegitimacy of the request. In the next example the customer has been cheated for 43 NOK (approximately 6 dollars) by a pirate taxi driver.

(7) (0305043)

1 C: \*hva kan dere 'gjøre med 'denslags?  
 1 *\*what can you 'do with 'such a 'thing?*

2 (1.5)

3 P: eh::::[:

4 C: [tatt 'nummeret på 'bilen,  
 4 *taken the 'car's 'licence number,*

5 (0.4)

6 P: hva 'vi kan 'gjøre da 'du ha::r eh::::: (. ) 'satt seg 'inn i  
 6 *what 'we can 'do as 'you ha:ve eh::::: (. ) 'entered*

7 en pi'ratdrosje og::::: be'talt for 'mye,  
 7 *a 'pirate 'taxi and::::: 'paid too 'much,*

8 (0.5)

9 C: ja,  
 9 *yes,*

10 (1.0)

11 C: dere >kan vel ikke 'gjøre< så 'mye, (0.3) når jeg 'godtar  
 11 *you >probably 'cannot 'do< very 'much, (0.3) when I 'accept*

12 at han sier 'hundre og 'femti kroner?  
 12 *that he says a 'hundred and 'fifty kroner?*

13 (0.2)

14 P: .hhh (.) For å::: være 'helt 'ærlig med deg så::: heh heh .hhh  
 14 *.hhh (.) To be::: 'quite 'honest with you then::: heh heh .hhh*

15 om vi ↓'kan gjøre ↑no, så:: ↓'kan ↑vi 'muligens  
 15 *if we [ 'can do ↑something, well:: we ↓'might possibly*

16 'gjøre ↑det men eh::: jeg tror 'nepp↑e at eh:: 'vi::  
 16 *'do ↑so but eh::: I 'hardly think that eh:: 'we::*

17 be'laster så mye ress'urser for [eh::  
 17 *would 'spend that many 'resources for eh::*

18 C: [nei,  
 18 *no,*

19 P: [for 'tre og førti 'kroner alt[så.  
 19 *[for 'forty 'three 'kroner you see.*

20 C: [( ) [dere har 'andre ting å [gjøre.  
 20 *you have got 'other things to do.*

21 P: [hja,  
 21 *hyes.*

The forthcoming dispreferred response is here projected by both pauses (l. 2) and hesitation (l. 3), but most notably the officer delays the answer by initiating a repair sequence which takes the form of a formulation of gist of the question (l. 6-7), describing the situation in a way that clearly implies the illegitimacy of the caller's actions and his own responsibility ("you have entered a pirate taxi"). This formulation foreshadows a rejection in that it presents transparent reasons for declining the request. The caller first just confirms the formulation (l. 9) but after yet another second's pause without any answer forthcoming he pre-empts the rejection himself by "guessing" that the answer will be negative ("probably not much"). The police officer continues to emphasize the illegitimacy of the request by not confirming the caller's guess but rather explaining that it is not a question of what is possible to do but what they are *willing* to spend their resources on. In changing the explanation from possibility to willingness he aggravates rather than softens the rejection. The explanation thus does not primarily serve to account for the rejection but to point out the illegitimacy of the caller's request.

Aggravated rejections may also occur when callers do not accept an initial rejection and pursue a response beyond what is deemed appropriate. This can be seen in a rather long extract where the conversation develops into a confrontation between the parties. We start with the opening of the call, which shows that this call is not the first time the caller makes the inquiry:

(8) (0302006)

1 P: Poli'tivakta 'Sentrum,  
1 Po'lice duty desk City centre,  
2 (0.6)

3 C: Ja god'dag nå 'snakker du med (0.7) ((navn)) igjen,  
3 Yes hello you are' talking with (0.7) ((name)) again,  
4 (0.4)

5 P: ↓Ja.  
5 ↓Yes.  
6 (0.4)

7 C: Jeg 'tenkte hvis han::::: fyren som heter (0.5) ((navn))  
7 (0.4) I was 'thinking if he::::: the guy called (0.5) ((name))  
8 blir 'sendt med drosje opp til: eh (1.2) ((gatenavn)),  
8 is 'sent by taxi up to: eh (1.2) ((street name)),  
9 (0.8)

10 P: ja ja det 'ble noen for'andringer 'der tror jeg.  
10 yes yes there 'were some 'changes 'there I think.  
11 (0.3)

12 C: eh 'ja det 'ble 'det ja.  
12 eh so it was, was it.  
13 (0.4)

14 P: Ja.  
14 Yes.  
15 (1.5)

16 C: Ja,  
16 Yes.  
17 (0.3)



The notable falling intonation in the officer's "yes" (line 5), in response to the caller's introduction of himself, is a remarkable feature, since it contrasts sharply with the rising intonation which is otherwise characteristic of the opening sequences, signalling accessibility and the expectation of more. The response seems to signal recognition but does not prompt the interlocutor to proceed. The potential hostility of this reply may possibly underlie the hesitating and cautious presentation of the reason for the call in the next lines. And before the caller gets to the projected presentation the officer interrupts him to cancel the presuppositions of the question (line 10). This is done in a minimal and reticent format in that it constitutes a mere announcement that there have been changes without any account of what the changes are or the reason for them.

One could expect an account by the police officer, or a "why?" from the caller. Instead, his repetition ("ja, det ble det, ja" – "so it was, was it.") with an end particle and falling intonation signals that the information is received and accepted. Even if such repetitions are common as a receipt of unexpected information, they may also be a repair initiator requesting some elaboration, cf. Schegloff (1997). However, the officer provides only a minimal response and may thus be heard as holding back an account. This is evident by the following silence, in which the caller seems to wait for more. This form of silence has been described as a display of authority in that the speaker exercises his right to deny the interlocutor information, cf. Gibbons (2003: 88).

In the following (not shown here for reasons of space), the caller accepts this explanation and motivates his call by saying that he was intending to pick up the person in question and letting him stay at his place. To this, the officer says that he does not know where he is, since some officers fetched him and drove off with him. In reporting this, the officer uses a somewhat unusual reference form, namely a third person reference: "*the police* came and 'fetched him". The caller tries once more to get information but the officer again claims no access to the information. At this point, the caller changes his line of action from passive resistance and revised requests to challenging the legitimacy of the officer's rejection:

(9) (0302006)

30 P: 'Ja o 'key men nå det 'vet jeg-ke om han kommer opp 'dit  
 30 'Yes o'kay but now I don't 'know if he'll be 'there  
 31 eller 'ikke altså,  
 31 or not,

32 (0.4)

33 C: Ne:i (0.3) [(men)  
33 N:o (0.3) (but)

34 P: [de bare 'henta ham 'her og for'svant,  
34 they just 'picked him up 'here and disap'peared.

35 (0.8)

36 C: De bare 'henta ham og for'svant,  
36 They just picked him 'up and disap'peared.

37 P: [ja,  
37 [yes,

38 C: [men du 'jobber jo i poli'tiet da, så vidt jeg vet.  
38 [but you 'do work in the police, as far as I know.

39 (1.0)

40 P: 'Jeg jobber i poli'tiet ja?  
40 'I do work with the police yes?

41 C: (.) Ja,  
41 (.) yes,

42 (0.2)

43 P: [Ja,  
43 yes,

44 C: ['du jobber i poli'tiet.  
44 'you do work with the po'lice.

45 (.)

46 P: 'Jaa,  
46 'Ye:s,

47 (0.6)

48 C: Så det det 'må eh være 'mulig for deg å:: (1.4) å:: eh:  
48 So it it 'must be 'possible for you to:: (1.4) to:: eh:

49 å:: eh: å::: eh: finne 'uthh eventu'elt hvor han 'er?  
49 to:: eh: to::: eh: find 'outhh where he might 'be?

50 (0.2)

51 C: for eh da må jeg komme og 'hente han da vet du.  
51 cause eh then I'll have to come and 'fetch him you know.

52 (0.7)

- 53 P: At >'du må komme og< 'hente han?  
53 *That >you'll have to come and< 'fetch him?*
- 54 (0.2)
- 55 C: 'jaa,  
55 'yees,
- 56 (0.2)
- 57 P: (men) du sa at du ikke 'kunne komme og hente han.  
57 *(but) you said that you 'could not come and fetch him.*
- 58 (0.7)
- 59 C: Ja men hvis ikkje de 'kjører ham hit så 'må jeg jo  
59 *Yes but if they don't 'drive him here then I'll 'have to*
- 60 *komme og hente ham da vet du.*  
60 *come and fetch him you know.*
- 61 C: men han 'kan jo ikkje bare ligge på en 'glattcelle når han  
61 *but surely he can't just lie in a prison'cell when he*
- 62 *kan 'overnatte hos 'meg?*  
62 *can spend the' night in 'my place?*
- 63 (0.4)
- 64 P: 'Nei, 'det er det 'vi som be'stemmer.  
64 *'No, 'that's up to 'us to de'cide.*
- 65 (3.4)
- 66 C: Det er 'de som bestemmer 'det ja.  
66 *It is up to 'you to decide 'this yes.*
- 67 (0.3)
- 68 P: 'Det er det poli'tiet som bestemmer ja,  
68 *'That is for the police to de'cide yes,*
- 69 *(>alt etter bildet<),*  
69 *(>depending on the picture<)*

The repeat of the whole answer in line 36 is here used as a preface which holds up the answer as a target for a forthcoming disaligning action (on a similar use of repeats in the context of answering questions, see Bolden (2009)). The statement that the other “works with the police” directly challenges the footing taken up the officer and thus clearly conveys that he *ought to*

know. The added "as far as I know" (line 38) may suggest that the caller is talking from a high status position and so to some extent is talking "down" to the other.

The hostile character of the statement is confirmed by the officer's response (l. 40), which comes in a dispreferred format including a long initial silence, although it presents an affirmative answer. After a prolonged silence he presents a non-type-conforming answer by not using a polarity token but producing a full sentence. The full form of the echo answer is a claim of epistemic authority in that the speaker takes independent responsibility for the formulation as author and principal, cf. Svennevig (2003). Furthermore, the answer merely confirms the literal meaning of the question and thus overhears the implicit challenge and request for an account. All this contributes to making the response a challenge in return, and thus treating the prior initiative as illegitimate or inappropriate.

The client thus reformulates his initiative, displaying a high entitlement to getting the information and explicitly refuting the contingency that the officer is not able to tell ("det må være mulig for deg/it must be possible for you"). Thereby, he repeats the potential complaint that the officer is not acting appropriately in not providing the information. However, he also adds an increment with an account motivating his question (namely that he needs the information so that he can pick him up) and this softens the confrontational character of the request somewhat. The increment provides the opportunity for the officer to ignore the request and instead respond to the increment. He produces a questioning repeat (line 53) and in this litigious situation, such a repair initiation may easily be heard as a harbinger of a forthcoming misaligning action (cf. Schegloff 2007:102). He then counters the request by confronting the caller with his own previous reports: "but you said that you couldn't come and fetch him" (l. 57). This form of question has been shown to be used in police interrogations to express suspicion about the veracity of a suspect's report, cf. Jönsson & Linell (1996) and constitutes a highly offensive way of questioning the legitimacy of the caller's request.

The caller does not react to the challenge by justifying his previous reports, but instead continues to present reasons for why he needs information, thus returning to his original request. It ends with a "rhetorical question" (line 61-62) that has the obvious answer that it would be unreasonable that his friend should spend the night in jail when he can stay with him. This makes the officer's direct rejection even more confrontational. He does not concede anything to this

“appeal to reason” but instead makes an undisguised display of authority: “that’s up to us to decide”.

The 3.5 second silence in line 65 is remarkably long, a sign of something amiss. The following repeat with an appended response word with falling intonation displays acceptance and the caller thus seems to yield. At the same time, repeats with falling intonation may also be treated as repair initiators, as requests for confirmation or elaboration, cf. Schegloff (1997). The confirmation given is again in the form of a full sentence rather than a type-conforming response word, thus again taking a position of authority. He also declines the possible request for elaboration by just repeating his previous answer, all the while formalizing the tone by substituting “us” by the more formal “the police”.

The same pattern is repeated again later in the conversation, in lines 88–95, where he caller argues that as a family member, he has a right to be informed.

(10) (0302006)

88 C: og da 'må jo jeg få 'vite::: siden eh 'eg er hans 'påførende  
 88 *And so I must have to' know::: since eh 'I am his 'next-of-kin*

89 'her i 'Oslo?  
 89 *'here in Oslo?*

90 (0.2)

91 P: ↓Ne:i. det 'må du ikkje 'vite.  
 91 *↓No: you don't have to 'know.*

92 (1.9)

93 C: Jeg 'måkje 'vite det 'nei?  
 93 *I don't have to 'know, do I?*

94 P: >du hakje no krav< 'på å vite 'det nei,  
 94 *>you've no right< to know 'no,*

95 (2.8)

Again, the caller makes an explicit reference to his entitlements and formulates it as an appeal to reason, but is abruptly dismissed by the officer without any account or explanation. After a relatively long pause (line 92) the caller repeats the officer’s words with an appended response word (“nei”) with rising intonation, displaying an emotional stance of surprise, cf. Svennevig (2004). It also makes relevant some form of elaboration. However, the officer’s reply is yet

another repetition of his own previous response, underlining the legal authority of the claim by substituting “have to know” for “you’ve no right to know”. A long pause follows, in which the caller makes relevant an expansion of the answer but the officer withholds.

In a certain number of requests, then, rejections are performed in an aggravated form, with no mitigating features, but on the contrary a direct and reinforced rejection component delivered with no signs of hesitation or reticence, that is, dispreference markers. This sharpens the rejection and embodies a confrontational stance. Furthermore, it conveys an implicit criticism of the request as being in some sense illegitimate or inappropriate. The reason may be that the request touches on institutional constraints that prevent the officer from granting the request. However, this may not be accessible to the callers, and thus the abruptness of the rejection may seem incomprehensible to them. This is evidenced by all the passive resistance and active pursuit of a positive answer that they engage in after such rejections.

## **Discussion**

In conversations such as these, defined as service encounters between a police officer and an ordinary member of the public, it is not surprising that the majority of the calls are dealt with by the police officer in a respectful, considerate and helpful manner. What deserves attention is the fact that the exceptions to the rule are not found in the huge category of calls defined as “standard” or “routine”, but in the far smaller category of calls in which a positive answer is difficult to give, due to various institutional constraints (professional secrecy, low priority cases, a lack of resources, non-police matters). What is even more noteworthy is that the subject matter of calls belonging to this category, such as questions concerning relatives in police custody, or requests for police assistance, e.g. after burglaries, may be of greater personal importance to the caller than the more “routine” requests that make up the main part of the material. Thus, in such cases even more attention to the format of the rejection might be expected from the officer.

The answer may be found in the observation by ten Have (1999: 41) concerning the mechanisms of preference, namely that the use of preference is due to “the possible normative orientation of the participants, available for various usages as *they see fit*” (author’s emphasis). So while rejections in a mitigated and dispreferred format is what you would expect from a police

officer manning a service-oriented duty desk, the very absence of dispreference must in some cases mean that there is also another norm at work.

Judging from the examples, one reason why police officers occasionally choose to give negative answers in a direct and even aggravated form may be that the caller's request is construed as a challenge, an inappropriate thing to do, or as an interference with police rules. Consequently, the officer may choose to answer on the same note. In such cases, the caller is cast in the role of an opponent by the police officer, who no longer sees any need for face-saving devices. Similarly, if a request is perceived as not being a police matter, the caller may not qualify for the same service-mindedness as do others.

However, the effect of such abrupt refusals, especially if no account is given, is at least to add a hostile note to the interaction, especially since the caller may not even know that what has been said may be construed by the other as an inappropriate request or a provocation. The fact remains that most people have little knowledge about the day-to-day organisation of police work, they seldom know what constitutes a police matter and what doesn't, and they usually ignore what might be an infringement upon professional ground.

At this point, it may be useful to refer to the following observation by Waddington (1999) of the way police tend to differentiate between "ordinary people", defined as "citizens" and others:

"To the extent that police exercise authority over *citizens*, then policing is hesitant and cautious because citizens have rights, but where the police impose alien authority on a rebellious subject then coercive power is exercised with little restraint" (1999: 30).

Also, where the dividing line goes between those who are perceived as "citizens" or "ordinary people" on the one hand and the "rebellious subjects" on the other, may depend on how the behavior of the same people is construed in the eyes of the police. Again according to Waddington, if ordinary citizens refuse to give in to police instructions, this will be interpreted as a challenge to police authority (ibid.: 17). In the same way, then, repeated argumentation by the citizens or displays of irritation or anger risk being interpreted as unacceptable attitudes or even dangerous resistance, which then asks for an answer in kind. This may explain why certain callers are treated as behaving in "unacceptable" ways when they ask questions about things that touch upon institutional constraints, such as professional secrecy, or when they question an officer's

discretionary decisions. They are cast in the role of an opponent and treated as such, without the right to the usual courtesy and service-mindedness that is otherwise accorded to normal citizens.

In the case of rejections, an additional element which may also contribute to a heightened conflict level is the affective stance and the tone of surprise or irritation that certain callers display in their response to a negative answer. As was observed above in examples (9) and (10), such emotional responses are just followed by another rejection, and without an account.

In addition, the sometimes abrupt tone of certain rejections may also be an unintended result of the training of the police, in which systematic communication practice mainly focuses on witness and suspect interview techniques, as well as answering emergency calls. Both are communicative activities whose main objective is to gather precise and correct information. By comparison, the day-to-day communication with the public, maybe the most common activity of all police work, is accorded far less attention and is mainly left to be learnt “on the job”, or under the guidance of more experienced colleagues. An unintended consequence of this may be a tendency to genre contamination, where strategies that belong to the other two communicative activities are transferred the officers’ day-to-day communicative encounter with the public.

For instance, in example (9) above, we observed a characteristic feature of suspect interview techniques, namely confronting the caller with an inconsistency in his explanation. But inconsistency is not uncommon in the conversations of everyday life, and discrepancies will seldom be treated as attempted lying. In a verbal interaction such as the one in question, where a private citizen calls the police in order to inquire about the whereabouts of a relative, being confronted with an earlier utterance as if he is being questioned as a possible suspect might not be helpful for the conversational climate between the two, and probably contribute to a sharpening of the tone.

## **Conclusion**

The overall majority of the communicative activities between the police and ordinary citizens, in this study represented by telephone calls to a police duty desk, are characterized by the call-takers’ polite, helpful and respectful way of dealing with the callers. This may be interpreted as an orientation towards meeting the callers in a positive manner, by displaying service-mindedness. The rejection of requests, though, will usually bring about more problematic reactions. Because a rejection or a refusal is a face-threatening action, we can expect the



mechanisms of dispreference to be at work in such cases, in order to prevent or reduce a predictable negative reaction. In most cases, then, we find that refusals are given in a dispreferred form. Common devices are preparatory strategies such as pre-sequences and reservations, the use of hedges, accounts, regrets and expressed empathy.

However, problems may arise when some requests are rejected without any mitigating devices, and consequently in a face-threatening way. Such unmitigated rejections are especially found within a particular category of calls where the caller's requests are either defined as not police matters or butt upon institutional constraints, and which for that reason cannot be complied with by the police. Also, problems may be caused by the caller's insisting on her or his demand, sometimes with expressions of strong affect, such as surprise or irritation. In quite a few of these conversations, negative response by the police is given in a direct and rather blunt way, where you would expect the same mechanisms of dispreference and face-saving devices that seem to be the rule in the more standard conversations. If the caller then keeps arguing for his or her case, in spite of repeated refusals by the professional, eventually this may result in open conflict. In such cases, then, the officers do not seem to live up to their own ideals of showing service-mindedness, and thus contributing to a positive relationship with the public.

A possible explanation for the lack of service-mindedness in encounters such as these may be found in the existence of internal norms within the police, which may affect the way the public is perceived, and consequently the way they are treated. Several examples show that when people ask questions that infringe upon institutional constraints, such as confidentiality, or if they contest the other's judgement by insisting on their demands after a refusal has been given, the police may treat the other as an opponent and give their response in a direct and thus face-threatening way. Since a great deal of police decisions have to be based on discretionary assessments, repeated requests after a rejection may also be construed by the police officer as an implied criticism, and thus felt to be a challenge to his or her authority as a police officer, which may be felt as a justification to hit back. The effect of such abrupt refusals may clearly add a hostile note to the interaction and escalate the conflict level; in particular if the caller is ignorant about police regulations and procedures and may not even know that what has been said may be understood as some kind of provocation.

Also, while the goal-orientation of the three types of police interaction with the public

- witness or suspect interviews, emergency calls and ordinary conversations with the citizens - is clearly different, it still seems that some police officers tend to consider the calls from the general public to have the same function as the two other communicative events, whose general objective is to gather information. However, when people contact the police in everyday situations to offer information or to make requests, the reason may also be that they find themselves in a problematic situation, and need to share their trouble with someone who can offer professional help and emotional support. If this interpersonal aspect is overlooked by the police, the opportunity to display service-mindedness as a means to build relations and establish a climate of confidence and trust may be missed. An unintended consequence may be that if citizens approach the police for help with their “everyday” problems and are rejected in a face-threatening way, this may not only lead to discontent, but to a lack of confidence in the police in general as well.

#### *Appendix: Transcription Conventions*

The transcriptions follow the standard CA conventions with a couple of additions. First, elongations of sounds are measured and indicated by one elongation sign (: ) for each 0.1 second. A vowel that is elongated for 0.4 seconds is thus written like this: “fo:::r”. Second, stress is indicated by an apostrophe in front of the accentuated syllable, like this: “be’lieve”. Underlining is thus used for emphatic stress only. The parties are referred to as “caller” (C) and “police officer” (P), respectively.

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