

Making the Case for Airline Compassion Fares: The Serial Organization of Problem Narratives During a Family Crisis

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Faced with the need to make last minute and thus unexpected travel plans to visit his dying mother, a son searches for discounted and timely airline reservations. His search for *compassion* fares involves a series of interactions with family members before and after calls to major airlines. We identify specific devices for delicately initiating phone openings with airline agents, making a persuasive case for urgent and affordable assistance and soliciting special understandings regarding the legitimacy of his troubling circumstances. Attention is drawn to the serial organization and cumulative impact of calls over time, one advantage of working with longitudinal data. It is shown how an initial call with the son's mom and dad forms the basis for subsequent problem narratives, the contingent enactment of narratives as progressively built for agents, and a retrospective summary to an aunt whose advice about *compassion fares* was misinformed. Numerous ironies are identified: unavoidable disjunctures between institutional representatives and lay persons, how the son streamlines his actions as an upshot of learning about the airline system, and ways predictions about imminent death give rise to interactional trajectories susceptible to modification and change.

Airline representatives receive thousands of calls yearly from individuals who, facing a crisis due to critical illness or death of a family member, are in need of arranging last-minute travel plans to be with distant relatives.

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352

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

Searches for discounted and open-ended tickets are set into motion by family members, activities that may involve initiating numerous telephone calls with major airlines.¹ Airlines offer *compassion* fares to facilitate bedside vigils for grieving family members as well as *bereavement* fares to attend funerals for those who have already died.²

The phone calls examined herein involve a son seeking to travel home to visit with his mother who is dying from cancer and also to spend time with his family during this difficult period. These naturally occurring interactions include the son, three family members (mom, dad, and aunt) he spoke with *before* and *after* calling the airlines, and five different airline representatives called by the son in pursuit of what he describes as "compassion fares" (see the "Data and Method" section following). When calling the airlines for discounted fares, it emerges as the son's task to legitimately make himself out to be *a person in need-in* the midst of a family crisis he did not ask for but is nevertheless caught up within and thus preoccupied with. In turn, the exhibited job of airline agents is to determine both the legitimacy of the caller's need, what category of need caller falls within, and thus which services (if any) might be offered.

In this article, we examine (a) the opening moments of calls to airline agents, (b) the son's initial requests for information about "compassion fares," (c) how the form of the son's repeated requests, built as narratives about his circumstances, get modified and streamlined across calls in response to interactional contingencies, and (d) how interactions with family members influence and are influenced by the airline calls.³

Three basic research questions are addressed:

What practices are recruited by the son as he delicately requests information and through portrayal of his troubling circumstances attempts to legitimate (i.e., make his case for) being a candidate for discounted fares?

From the opening moments of the son's calls with the airlines, we reveal how the son's actions

are designed to deformatize, personalize, and treat as delicate subsequent disclosures about his family crisis. In each call, the son repeatedly relies on the same basic set of resources for narrating his problem and thus making his case (e.g., being a graduate student with little money). However, specific and contingent actions are shown to emerge *on the cusp* of interactional moments (e.g., agents' questions) that could not be intuited nor fully planned out by the son in advance.⁴

We closely examine how the son's a priori approaches to calling airlines become improvised, social involvements. Further, our analysis also reveals the emergent and progressive character of the son's actions: How does the son, as an upshot of accumulated experiences with family members and prior agents, adapt and thereby alter his orientations to contiguous and subsequent airline calls to the airlines? *The serial ordering* of airline calls is thus a focal concern of our analysis such that any given set of interactional circumstances can be laid bare as progressively built, developmental orientations to tasks extending beyond a single encounter (i.e., getting the best rate offered by airlines).

A related and secondary focus addresses the following:

How do agents respond to the son's requests for "compassion fares"?

In all but one call, airline agents inform the son that despite his stated problem narratives, he does not qualify for "compassion fares"; they are not offered by their airline.

Finally, we address how conversations with relatives, prior to and following calls to the airlines, reveal key features bearing on the son's actions:

How do familial conversations influence subsequent interactional conduct when talking with institutional representatives? How do institutional encounters get reconstructed to family members following calls?

We examine how the son's prior conversations with mom and dad function as essential background understandings and motives informing action, that is, as resources for shaping subsequent airline involvements. The final call we examine between the son and his aunt includes the son's retrospective accounting to his aunt about how her advice regarding "compassion fares" contrasted with his accrued experiences from talking with airline representatives. Taken together, these initial and final calls aid in framing how the son's subsequent calls to the airlines were influenced by interactions occurring before his calls and retrospectively, in an attempt to explain his a priori versus post hoc experiences. Collaborative strategies for affording and soliciting discounted fares also become apparent.

Our analysis proceeds by examining calls in the order in which they occurred in order to preserve a sense of the natural evolution of these chronological activities.

SITUATING "COMPASSION CALLS" AS SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

Our examination of "compassion calls" may be usefully contrasted with other types of emergency (911) assistance and an array of other service encounters.⁵

Previous research has examined an what might be characterized as "customer service telephone calls," encounters in which "people [call] an institution of some sort for some sorts of assistance" (Sacks, 1992, p. 377). Forexam-

354 Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

ple, analysis has focused on suicide prevention hotlines (Sacks, 1992), calls for 911 emergency assistance (e.g., K. Tracy, 1997; K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998; S. J. Tracy, 2002; S. J. Tracy & Tracy, 1998; Wakin & Zimmerman, 1999; J. Whalen, 1990; J. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1998; J. Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988; M. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987; Zimmerman, 1992), a poison control hotline (Frankel, 1989), a mental health peer-run "warm line" (Pudlinski, 1998), a consumer help line (Torode, 1995), a software help line (Baker, Emmison, & Firth, 2001), and a travel agency (Mazeland, Huisman, & Schasfoort, 1995). From these studies, two features might be noted at the outset as having particular relevance to the airline calls we examine.

First, it appears universal that call takers, as institutional and thus bureaucratic representatives (see Drew & Heritage, 1992), transform the caller's inquiry into a routine call comprising the call taker's standardized "day's work" (J. Whalen, 1990). A preexisting institutional arrangement awaits callers. Staff who are otherwise detached (but not necessarily uncaring) individuals regularly perform

tasks involving callers' problems with which they may be quite unfamiliar (e.g., traveling home to be with a dying mother). Thus, lay persons' lives often require them to enter into a relationship with call takers whose daily work involves transacting a considerable volume of arrangements (urgent and nonurgent alike).

It is normal, then, for discrepancies to be apparent between callers' presented needs and call takers' service-oriented actions. Whether attention is given by call takers to categorizing the seriousness of the reported trouble in ways delaying service (Frankel, 1989; Sacks, 1992; J. Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988; M. R. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990), addressing inherently adversarial help line calls (Torode, 1995), or even negotiating satisfactory descriptions of vacations sought by customers (Mazeland et al., 1995), call takers enact "gatekeeping" functions (see Baker et al., 2001; Maynard & Schaeffer, 1997, 2002a; Note 5). Because representatives' actions are inevitably constrained by institutional offerings (i.e., categories of product, service, or information), a call taker "tries to create an overlap between possibilities of the agency and the preferences of the customer by interpreting the categorization in the vicinity of the customer in such a way that contains categories to satisfy both" (Mazeland et al., 1995, p. 281). Fundamentally, however unique callers' problems might be, they remain "just another problem" in a series for call takers whose work involves processing large numbers of service calls.

Second, *urgency* alters participants' orientations to the time-sensitive nature of information exchanged, and in all cases is interactionally negoti-

ated. Calls to a 911 emergency or poison control center operator addressin potential or actual life-threatening issues (i.e., heart attack or a child who at rat poison) stand in marked contrast to less urgent discussions about utilizin software or planning vacations. The airline calls we address involving a so seeking information about "compassion fares" to visit his dying mother an family, are midpositioned between these more/less urgent extremes. A basi continuum depicting service calls according to urgency appears in Figure 1.

Of course, a call to a poison control hotline could vary from immedi ately to less urgent (e.g., what to give a child who just ingested poison v! information about risks associated with using home pesticides). So to might a customer's call to the airlines be even more urgent than what th son presents for agents' consideration in the calls examined herein (i.e., need to travel in the next few hours rather than few days).

Phone calls examined herein are distinctive in several ways. First, the: are drawn from the "Malignancy corpus"⁶-the first recorded natural his tory, from diagnosis through death (13 months/60 calls), of a family' phone calls as they address life events arising in unison with the progres sive development of the mom's cancer. Second, data consist of eight re corded and transcribed phone calls occurring within a 24-hr period. Six o these calls were to major airlines within approximately 1 hr during that sin gle day. Third, as noted, we also have available for analysis phone call; preceding (mom and dad) and subsequent (aunt) to the son's calls to tht airlines. These phone calls provide exemplars of how routine interactions among family members and airline representatives, are uniquely problem atic and interwoven throughout everyday life.

When familial and institutional calls are examined together, situated it a natural chronology of everyday encounters, it becomes possible to examine how interactionally distinct solutions emerge to noticeably different

Continuum of Customer Service Telephone Calls According to Urgency
911/Poison Control- Suicide Hotline-Airline "Compassion"-Pser Wean Lins-+Softtrr./Trev.1 H.lpltn.

FIGURE I Continuum of customer service telephone calls according to urgency.

DATA AND METHOD

More urgent

Less Urgent

interactional problems. For example, in a discussion with his seriously ill mother, the son is initially faced with making a choice and committing to travel home. Later, during the same call, he must next inform his dad about reasons underlying his decision to travel home as well as seek dad's financial assistance. Once familial travel decisions are made, discussed, and financed, the son next pursues his travel reservations by calling airlines whose offerings and restrictions influence his abilities to travel quickly and cheaply. Having completed calls to the airlines, the son is now in a position to inform his aunt (a flight attendant) about how his experiences from these calls differed from her earlier travel advice regarding "compassion fares."

Conversation analytic methods are employed (e.g., see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Sacks, 1992). Anchored in repeated listenings of recordings in unison with systematic inspections of carefully produced transcriptions, priority is given to locating and substantiating participants' methods for organizing and thus accomplishing social actions. It is an explicit and working feature of this research method that participants continually and intrinsically achieve, through an array of interactional practices, displayed understandings of emergent interactional circumstances. The overriding goal is to identify patterned orientations to moment-by-moment contingencies of interaction comprising everyday life events.

PROLOGUE: GROUNDS FOR FAMILY CRISIS

The first of eight calls we examine in this article provides sobering and poignant glimpses into why this family is undergoing crisis. Prior to Excerpt 1 (following), mom (M) informs the son (S) that she does not want to be placed on life support, her "Tpa.in is just- (1.4) unre:al.=" and that she is incoherent at times as a result of the morphine she has been taking to minimize her pain. She also explicitly addresses the inherent uncertainty of not knowing how long her dying might take: "I don't know.=I mean I: just don't know. I'm- I:'m (.) not done it, so >1 don't kno:w<."⁷ Excerpt 1 begins with her articulation of the dilemma she is facing:

1) SDCL:Malignancy 3:3-4

M: = A:h, (.) But I don't know if- if I say no life support? (0.2) and I get in there and it's >r(h)real
r(h)real T uick< S: Mm hmm
(1.1)

Airline Compassion Fares

357

M: Which of course >1 have no way of knowing?<
S: Yeah.
(1.2)
M: 1 -* Then maybe you can't get here. = And maybe you don't <wa::nt,>
S: 1 -> to get here..hh [()]
[> Yeah I want to get there. <]
M: Yeah? Yeah..hh >1 said to Dad you know- or Da:d said to me.<
Says you want- you wanna be here for this, or the memor:ial
2 - service.(0.5) `Cause now we're ta:lkin' mo:ney.
S: Um hmm. hhh
M: 2 - h Which we know you have little o:f?=
S: =Ye:ah.

(0.6)

M: 2 -a ° You're° not wealthy. =So we gotta- (0.4) TA:nd we're talkin'
your, (.)job °and your school an al[that.]°

As a background and preview to a more extended analysis of the son's airline calls, we briefly overview only two fundamental activities occurring throughout Excerpt 1.

First, mom states "maybe you can't get here," which is immediately qualified to "maybe you don't <wa::nt> to get here." Immediately, however, the son next makes clear that he can and wants to be with mom by responding "Yeah I want to get there" (1~).

Second, additional and very practical problems arise even though the son has just displayed his willingness to travel home: "'Cause now we're ta:lkin' mo:ney ... TA:nd we're talkin' your, (.)job °and your school an al[that.]°:' Obviously, a genuine urgency occasioned by critical illness does not alleviate limited financial resources or job/school responsibilities. Although such constraints can be addressed, they require organized efforts and workable solutions as responses to mom's health status-unstable and often ambiguous developments subject to daily fluctuation (Beach, 2001).

Updating and Planning Travel With Dad

During the same phone call, shortly following Excerpt 1 (previously), mom requests that the son inform dad about his decision:

2) SDCL:Malignancy 3:4-5

S: I - Well what I told Mom is- is as far as I'm concerned if the question is do I want to be there for- for this or the memorial service ... I

358

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

kinda feel like now would be a good (0.4) time to ah- (.) to be there with Mom, when she's still got (.) any- any time left ah and to be there together (.) you know (.)wi- with everybody now I think it would make more sense. (.) ah And (.) you know yes? I can't come for an: indefinite period an: I certainly can't come back an forth a couple of times 'cause I know as sure as hell I can't afford it. ((continues))

Here the son reports to dad a summary of his prior discussion with mom. He states an unequivocal preference to travel "now," stating what had not previously been articulated: "when she's still got (.) any- any time left ah and to be there together." Problems associated with repeated visits and money also reappear: "'cause I know as sure as hell I can't afford it."

Once dad (D) is informed of the son's intentions to travel immediately, attention is given over to what is known about "compassion fares" as a result of the son having talked with Auntie Carol, a flight attendant:

3) SDCL:Malignancy 3:6

D: Allright let me talk to Carol and find out what I do about plane tickets. = [Um.]

S: = [Yew you can ca::ll- there's a couple of different airlines. They have something called <compassion fares>, which means that they waive all restrictions and basically give you (.) um the best de:al hhh that's possible without all of the restrictions ... And I guess Continental, US Air, and American all do them ... An:d I guess you can buy you know like (.) relatively <openended> hhh (.) tickets and all of that kind of business. But I got this information from Auntie Carol, hhh so she'll know this. So >give her a holler < um- (0.3) and (.) if you need me to do anything from this: end, you know if you want me to just go down to the airport and- and b a ticket here ah an: just come home fi:ne. (.) You know call me..hhh (.) an I- I may have to get you- you to wire me some money or something.

It is important to notice how the son initially defines "compassion fares" as "they waive all restrictions and basically give you (.) um the best de:al." This preconception is repeatedly qualified by the son, however, as he twice states "I guess." Finally, and once again, practical issues involving

money are raised as the son lays out possible scenarios for enacting travel.

To summarize, it has been shown that the son was *interactionally* involved in a family crisis giving rise to calling the airlines. An urgency was thus created for travel, which the son subsequently initiated and pursued. Several practical considerations (e.g., job, scheduling, and money) also emerged as relevant issues to be addressed and resolved. The relevance of seeking information about "compassion fares" was specifically raised and discussed (with dad and aunt Carol). In short, this background provides an essential framework for understanding how, during the son's subsequent calls to airlines, he relied on earlier family conversations as resources for organizing requests for information.

ANALYSIS OF AIRLINE CALLS

Within approximately 1 hr, the son initiated six calls to major airlines. Two calls are not analyzed: A hang-up by the son following 4 min of listening to a Continental Airlines recording⁸ and a 16-sec (wrong number) encounter with a PAN AM representative while attempting to contact US Air. Prior to examining the son's "problem narratives," we first analyze three fundamental features of call openings:

Prebeginnings
Institutional identifications and greetings
"Hi" + "question for you" format

Prebeginnings

Work on calls for emergency (911) assistance has made clear that

... the process of projecting the character of the call is initiated through a "pre-beginning" ... the opening segment of emergency calls rests on a prior action presumed to have a particular relevancy: dialing an emergency number projects a need for help *prior* to the alignment ordinarily achieved by the identification/acknowledgment portion of opening sequence [just as] call-takers answering a 9-1-1 call (or other emergency number) are primed to hear it a request for help *before* the first word is spoken. The pre-beginning thus establishes the alignment of identities which provides a particular footing for the call ... the relevance of which continues in force until an alternative alignment is proposed through some action of the participants. (Zimmerman, 1992, pp. 432-434)

As summarized previously, the son initiated calls in a series that included American Airlines (AA), US Air (US), Continental (CN), and

360 Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

Southwest (SW). Understanding the son's prealignment with airlines as resources for travel help is also enhanced when considering (a) each successive call shapes subsequent involvements (see following) and (b) during the son's first attempt to speak with CN, he was placed on hold and for 4 min waited to speak with a representative before terminating the call. Waiting, then, is a normal and perhaps inevitable course of activity when soliciting airline assistance: Urgencies receive no preferential treatment prior to contact with an agent and, as we show, only then as responsive to the case being made that attention being given to a problem (i.e., by the caller) actually merits such categorization by the call taker (Sacks, 1992).

Institutional Identifications and Greetings

The opening moments of the four calls appear following:

4) Call #1: SDCL:Malignancy 4

AA: American Airlines. Greg Gaines? (0.2)

S: pt Hi. I got a question for you.=

5) Call #4: SDCL:Malignancy 7

US: US Air: reservations. This is Monica? S: Hi:: Uhm (.) question for you.

6) Call #5: SDCL:Malignancy 8

CN: Continental Airlines. Linda?

S: pt.hh Hi:. Um (.) got a question for you.

7) Call #6: SDCL:Malignancy 9

SW: Good evening? Thank you for calling Southwest Airlines? This is Jessica. How may I help you?

S: Hi? Do you have such a thing as what they call a <compa:ssion fare.>

Because of the obvious similarities of the first three calls, we begin by comparing their features, followed by a contrastive analysis with the final call to SW.

Most all telephone calls are triggered through *summons/answer* sequences, typically "rings" occasioning call takers to pick up the phone. These actions must somehow occur for parties to gain focused access to interaction (Hopper, 1992; Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986), giving rise to *identification/recognition* as parties next display for one another their "situated identities." Consider the following two openings in 911 emergency calls (from Zimmerman, 1992) in which institutional affiliations are followed by the caller's reportings of circumstances requiring help:

8) [MCE:21:1:1] (CT = call taker, C = caller) CT: Mid-City=emergency:

(•)

C: Yes."I'd like tuh report ur disturbance in an alleyway:, behind our building?

9) [WC:EMS:I:JW]

CT: Nine one one what is yur emerg- ((cut off by transmit static))

(•)

C: GO:D MY WIFE JUST SHOT HERSELF (.3) TWENTY TWO SIXTY EIGHT (GRANT) AVENUE
HURRY U:::P

362

In each instance, CTs open by stating their institutional affiliation and in Excerpt 9 move to query the caller about the emergency. In these ways, they establish their status as bureaucratic representatives ("Mid-city emergency," "Nine one one") but do so anonymously because no further self-identification (i.e., names) or information is provided (see M. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987). Next, C moves to report problems requiring assistance and, as with Excerpt 9, explicitly (and urgently) request help.

Similar to 911 calls, airline calls also begin not with a "Hello" commonly occurring in ordinary phone calls or even with a name (as with certain business/organizational interactions) but by official reference to the particular airline they represent:

10) Three Airline Openings: Affiliations + Self-Identifications AA: American Airlines. Greg Gaines?

I

US: US Air: reservations. This is Monica?

I

CN: C'onlidential Airlines. Linda?

With US, the agent further specifies that "reservations" have been accessed. Unlike 911 calls, however, airline call takers self-identify with first and last name (AA)-which as Sacks (1992) observed, allows next speaker the opportunity to choose whether to move to retain this formality or move toward a more informal tone-or just by stating first name (US, CN).

In contrast, consider the son's call to SW:

11) A More Personalized Airline Greeting

SW: Good evening? Thank you for calling Southwest Airlines? This is Jessica. How may I help you?

This opening is elaborated and more personalized in two ways: (a) before identifying that SW has been reached, the caller is bid "Good evening" and thanked for calling; and (b) following self-identification with first name ("Jessica"), the opening is brought to close with an explicit offering of "How may I help you?"

In contrast, earlier examined calls all begin with an institutional greeting followed by the representative's name. None of them offer an initial greeting or thanks for calling, and none of them ask how they may help the son. The SW greeting is thus designed to be much friendlier than any of the other companies. It is also interesting, and perhaps only coincidental, to note that in the end, SW was the company who was able to provide the son with the lowest fare. The interactional consequences of this more tailored opening,⁹ contrasted with the first three calls, are examined following.

Repeated "Hi" + "Question for You" Formats

Opening moments of the first three calls appear (once again) following. Notice that the son does not immediately announce his problem. Rather, and we argue consequentially, he first provides an anonymous yet repeated "Hi" response to agents' greetings (affiliation and offering of names), followed by "question for you":

12) Call #1: SDCL:Malignancy 4

13) Call #4: SDCL:Malignancy 7

US: US Air: reservations. This is Monica?

S: -> Hi:: Uhm () question for you.

14) Call #5: SDCL:Malignancy 8

CN: Continental Airlines. Linda?

S: -> pt hh Hi: Um (.) got a question for you.

It was Sacks (1992) who initially observed that when people call various institutions requiring help for a problem, the first way to "catch the special status of this sort of call happens right at the beginning of the call" (p. 377). Schegloff's (e.g., 1968, 1979, 1986) inquiries more fully reveal how telephone openings are rich environments for examining interactions between both known and unknown parties. For example, whereas institutional representatives somehow announce their identities and provide a name, callers typically do not. Both Schegloff (1986) and Hopper and Drummond (1992) have observed how the absence of greetings is routine among unacquainted strangers: Callers often delete the greeting and initial inquiry as well as withhold self-identification en route to moving directly to the business of the call.

Contrasts between ordinary and service provider calls have revealed two key features: (a) Increased specialization and thus the pursuit of *identification* over *recognition* responses to telephone summons; and (b) A general reduction in opening sequences, including an absence of "greetings" or "how are you" responses, which is consequential for earlier movement to first topic and thus "reason for the call" (Schegloff, 1979; M. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987; J. Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988). In these

ways

The reduction of the opening sequence ... exhibits participants' orientations to and appreciation of the contingencies of seeking and providing assistance, through an anonymous encounter in which the sequential achievement of prompt response to urgent need displays and reproduces the institutional features of the interaction. (M. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 178)

Such practices and canonical forms are subject to variation. Specifically, "If one speaker greets another by saying 'Hi' at the start of a telephone conversation, this ordinarily invokes the relevance of the category 'previously acquainted'..." (Hopper & Drummond, 1992, p. 193). *Of what relevance, then, are the son's repeated "Hi" usages (previously) at the out-*

AA: American Airlines. Greg Gaines?

(0.2)

S: -4 pt Hi. I got a question for you.=

364

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

Airline Compassion Fares

365

set of interactions with unknown airline representatives? Each of the son's "Hi"s are instances of routine divergences displaying how "special, problematic, urgent, or strategic" (Hopper & Drummond, 1992, p. 197) matters get enacted, which

simulates an opening for acquainted parties; then caller exploits this virtual pretense of acquaintance to ask a special favor. That is caller acts like an acquaintance as part of a *persuasive line of activity*. ... Callers augment the reduced forms ... in order to pursue transparent goals ... in certain telephone openings callers do use greetings to enact transparently-motivated social gestures. (Hopper & Drummond, 1992, pp. 192-193)

The son's "Hi"s are devices for simulating, and in this way are beginning to establish familiarity with major airline representatives. These actions are designed by the son to (a) deformalize and thus personalize his calls; (b) set up his subsequent requests for information, which, we argue, resemble *solicitation sfor favors* (see Maynard & Schaeffer, 2002); and thus, (c) create an environment conducive to requesting information about discounted fares.¹⁰ Because the son's repeated "Hi"s are themselves preliminary to his following "question for you"s, however, "Hi"s per se are accomplice to paired actions leading up to "problem narratives."

A variety of turn formats have been shown to involve preliminaries to what a speaker may be proposing to do, orientations designed to influence recipients' possible involvements in such actions (see Beach & Dunning, 1982; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1968; Terasaki, 1976). To better understand the working features of "Hi + question for you," it is useful to first contrast them with actions initially identified by Schegloff (1980) when examining how callers participate during radio talk shows. For example, when asking "Can I ask you a question?," callers orient to their calls as "conversations in a series" by announcing the "type of call one means to be initiating" (Schegloff, 1980, p. 106). Aside from functioning as basic practices for gaining the recipient's attention, such utterances are also centrally understood as marking "preliminariness" en route to prefiguring next and potentially *delicate* pursuits (e.g., requests, favors, apologies).

With the son's "Hi + question for you" formats he is, in similar fashion, enacting "preliminariness" to personal/delicate matters that, and importantly so, are being disclosed to a stranger on the telephone. That the son is preannouncing his question and not delivering it directly reflects his continual recognition of the importance attributed to agents' hearing his next positioned actions not simply as informational requests but as petitions for "personal" help. By extending his "Hi" greeting, the son's actions are designed to insure not just any hearing or response by the representatives. By enacting a more personal, less formal tone, the son works to set the stage for agents to hear subsequent disclosures about his mother, and lack of money, in ways granting legitimation for his case and possible empathy for his family crisis. Again, as discussed more fully following, these preliminaries contribute to how the son's actions qualify as not only "requesting" but, as he builds his case, a form of "favor asking" in pursuit of a specialized and sensitized identification with his troubling circumstances (see Maynard & Schaeffer, 2002).

RESPONDING TO A TAILORED OPENING

Similar to the prior three calls, the son responds to SW's elaborated opening with "Hi?" but here with emphasis and upward intonation:

15) Call #6: SDCL:Malignancy 9

SW: Good evening? Thank you for calling Southwest Airlines? This is Jessica. How may I help you?

S: - Hi? Do you have such a thing as what they call a <compassion fare>.

Unlike prior calls, however, the son does not follow his greeting with a preannouncement about a forthcoming question. Essentially, SW's prior offering of "How may I help you?" preempted the son needing to make such an announcement. The upshot is how the son designs his query by directly asking "Do you have such a thing as what they call a <compassion fare>." Is it possible that "such a thing as what they call" is an upshot of having spoken with prior airlines who offered only bereavement and *not* compassion fares? Perhaps this is so. However, the son is at least objectifying, and thereby treating "<compassion fare>" as a "social fact" and established category. He thus treats his reference as not his invention but a normal type of request for reduced fares routinely initiated and responded to by other cultural members.

We have thus far examined (a) prebeginnings, (b) the openings of serial airline calls comprised of institutional greetings/identification and the son's responsive greeting ("Hi"), and (c) the son's repeated "preannouncement" in the form of "question for you." Attention has also been

366 Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood
given to the son's response to SW's tailored opening. We are now in a position to address how the son formulates his additional "requests" for "compassion fares" and, in so doing, narrates his predicament for agents' hearing in ways legitimating his family crisis. We also give preliminary attention to agents' responses to the son's problem narratives.

PROBLEM NARRATIVES AND INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Excerpt 16 following includes the son's extended narrative and AA's initial responses. In this and three subsequent calls, the son's problem presentation includes five basic features (bolded here):

**Reference to being a graduate student (1-*),
who doesn't have much money (2-p),
yet needs to travel home in a hurry because his mother is dying (3-), has prior knowledge that
"compassion fares" exist (4-p), giving rise to a specific request about "compassion fares" (5-).**

From our overview of the son's prior conversations with mom and dad (and the son and dad's reported conversations with the aunt), it is clear that these features are not coincidental but *carried over* from these interactions. Essentially, (1-*5) are the son's *formulated upshots* of the basic gist of these conversations, paraphrased and adapted into a "script" or "template" for presenting his case to airline representatives (see Beach & Dixon, 2001; Heritage & Watson, 1979, 1980). Although these descriptions are variously configured in construction and ordering in the excerpts following (e.g., see 2/3--> following), we employ the same numbers with arrows throughout. Also, in all but one instance (the SW call), some versions of these narrative components are articulated *before* making a specific request (5-p).

Interactionally, then, the son's prediscussed topics eventuate as scripted/templated portrayals of his predicament. These resources are designed to enhance the likelihood that he will not only qualify but receive discounted rates associated with *compassion* status. We again emphasize, however, that although recurrent features appear across each of the son's four contiguous calls

(1-45), each call is contingently enacted as speakers respond to and shape emerging interactional circumstances-actions that cannot be fully planned for or anticipated in advance.

We begin with a longer excerpt from the son's call to American AA:

16) Call #1:Malignancy 4

American Airlines. Greg Gaines?

(0.2)

pt Hi. I got a question for' you.= =Yes?

I'm () a **graduate student** here at the University of Texas and uh[°Yes, uh huh.°]

[I jus-jus'] got a phone call: pt () ah and apparently my mother's going to die: pt (.) and I **need to get back to San Diego.** (.) **I am told there is such a thing as a compassion fare for poor folks like me who need to go somewhere in a hurry.** (.) **Do you have such a thing?** hhh (0.3)

T Well let's check out. Uh Do you wanna leave uh like leave as soon as possible?

Yeah uh well tomorrow I've got- I'm a teacher I've got some **stuff** I have to do first thing in the morning. And hh conceivably () tomorrow afternoon. I'm- I'm waiting for one more phone call before I'm:: sure, but I want to figure out what I have to do () ah to

AA: pull this off. So
Okay. Let me check just one second please.

Airline Compassion Fares 367

Consider the following occasioned actions, exemplars reflecting how the son adapts his a priori concerns to the contingencies of this particular call with AA:

1. The son's reference to "here" in (1-4)-the only such reference in the calls examined-invokes a shared demography with an AA agent assumed to be headquartered in Dallas, Texas. Referencing a shared place is one device for producing affiliation and thus assistance by a representative who is at least employed by a Texas airline, perhaps even a Texas resident, and for these reasons better positioned to accommodate the son's request.

2. The son initiates his attempt to make his case for "urgency" by referencing "I jus- jus'] got a phone call: pt (.) ah and apparently my **mother's going to die:.**" These emergent details could not be fully planned nor anticipated in advance. His utterance, built on the spot, invokes both *recency of a call and inherent ambiguity* ("apparently"). Both are central issues testifying to the nature of the crisis at hand and the son's role as a consequential

AA: 1 -*

S:

AA:

S:

AA: 2 -

S:

4 --

2/3 -

5 ->

AA: EN

S:

family member awaiting updated news (Beach, 2001). In response, although the son has just informed AA that his mother is dying, AA's response to this personal information is not

compassionate but service oriented. Immediate attention is given to establishing flight information, as the agent neither grants nor declines the son's informational request and does not acknowledge that such a fare exists. Rather, she asks a follow-up question.

3. It is in response to AA's query "Do you wanna leave uh like leave as soon as possible?"-an apparent and natural upshot of the son's just prior depiction of his urgent situation-that he provides an elaborated narrative ("EN"). This extension contains information that had it not been occasioned by the agent's prior query would likely not have emerged. Once available, however, the son *as question recipient* offers further details about his work as a teacher, schedule, and reliance on additional phone calls from family. Taken together, this information clarifies how and why the son does not yet know for sure just when he needs to depart. It thus offers a resolution to a potential disjuncture, emerging on the cusp of interaction and thus not preformed: the son's expressed urgency to travel yet inability to articulate when "as soon as possible" might be.

4. It is only in this first call to AA that the son's references to being a "graduate student" and "money" are separated. Here, although the son identifies himself as "graduate student" (1~) at the outset, "**poor fo:lks like me who need to go somewhere in a hurry**" (2/3-4) is delayed. His being both "poor" and "in a hurry" is conjoined immediately prior to making an indirect request (5-3; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Schegloff, 1988; Streeck, 1980): He queries about whether the airline offers the service ("such a thing?") rather than making a direct request for the service itself. In so doing, the son cautiously requests information in a manner providing the agent an "out," allowing for the possibility that the airline might not offer such fares. He also defines and operationalizes his lay notions about what compassion fares might be, including why he might qualify for a reduced rate (see Beach & Good, in press).

Essentially, the son's build up to making his indirect and cautious request (5-*) is constructed to delay the agent's yes-no answering of his question in lieu of a reply arising from consideration of the difficult situation with which he is faced. It may appear that the son is *asking a favor* by imploring the agent to respond to his dilemma, which "implicates different answering options ... a sense of being *solicited for a favor* rather than simply being *asked to comply* with a request ... [which] can more strongly compel a positive response" (Maynard & Schaeffer, 2002).¹¹

Yet a closer examination of the son's appeal reveals that the fundamental significance of a "favor"-in the generic sense, an act of kindness, goodwill, and/or special treatment-does not sufficiently capture several key features of the son's actions. In his narrative, the son nominates the category "compassion fare" and then proceeds to provide criteria for why he qualifies as facing a family emergency (e.g., mother's going to die). Although this is the only relevant criterion from the airline's perspective, the son also orients to his financial status as relevant ("poor fo:lks like me"). In these ways, the son attempts to *make his case* for receiving discounted fares-which AA eventually offers (although not analyzed herein)-but he does not seek special treatment such as requesting that the airline go against policy to grant him reduced rates. Thus, although the son's actions may be described as an active pursuit of empathic consideration for the fix he is in, which may (and does) qualify him for receiving a timely and cheaper ticket, such actions are not tantamount to *favor asking* per se.

Becoming Routinized: A More Deliberate Orientation

Indeed, as subsequent calls to airlines are initiated, occasions emerge (as with Excerpt 17 following) in which the son is informed that because *compassion fares* aren't offered, his stated criteria do not meet the requirements. In these moments, the son does not actively pursue reconsideration in light of his special circumstances (although he may briefly comment on them, as with Excerpt 17). Rather, he displays understanding of bureaucratic categories and policies and moves to closing the call.

The second call to US, what eventuates in a shortened encounter because "We don't really have a compassionate fare," appears in full following. Prior to the agent's announcement, however, the son proceeds to narrate his troubling circumstances:

17) Call #2:Malignancy 7

US: ((Recording)) Thank you for calling US Air reservations? (.) All of our agents are busy? (.) However please stay on the line, as your call will be handled
US: US Air: reservations. This is Monica?

370

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

S: 4 -* Hi::: Uhm (.) question for you.pt hh **I understand that there is**
4 -* **something caaled a <compassion fa:re>..hhh I just found out that -3**
I need to: (.) get home, my mother's about to die?.hhh U::m pt
<-3
1/2 -* and **I'm a graduate student and have no:t got much money>.**
US: .hh [U:m]=
[Umm:]
S: 5 -- =[Do you

US: [>We don't really have a compassionate fa:re. We have what we call
call
a bereavement fare. < _
S: =Oka[:y. hhh
US: [And unfortunately <tha.t is when> someone has a:lready passed
S: awa::y.=
=All right=
US: =We do u:m we do offer, that fa:re when people are going to a
fu:neral:=
S: =Ok(h)a:y. TWell fu:neral won't happen 'til after I get there,

US: I('ve) suppo:se..hhhhh TO:kay. Well thank you anyway. hh=
=>I'm: sorry I couldn't help [you.<
S: [That's all right. Bye.
(End of Phone Call)

A preliminary observation is that this call to US is produced more slowly and deliberately (see "UhmIUm") than the son's prior call to AA. As a second presented problem narrative, the son begins to enact an "assembly line" demeanor: He exhibits becoming acclimatized to involvement with the airline system. Several marked differences from talking with AA (previously) are evident as the son produces adjustments arising from his earlier call:

- Unlike the first call to AA, the son's "question for you" is more streamlined as his agent and verb ("I have a") are deleted. This utterance is followed by a lipsmack and inbreath ("pt.hh), which provides only a brief slot for the US agent to respond following "question for you." (In the previous Excerpt 16, the agent's "Yes?" response is latched onto the end of "question for you," with no intervening space.) Next, the son moves directly to "**I understand that there is**

something caaled a <compassion fare>" (4 ~).

- Rather than beginning with his justifications for needing the fare, as with AA, he straightforwardly announces his purpose for his call.

Airline Compassion Fares

371

- The son retains a sense of recency with "I just found out that I need to: (.) get home." He withholds mentioning "San Diego" in favor of "get home," a different locational reference than with AA in Dallas (and him in Austin).

- He alters "apparently my mother's going to die" to an upgraded, less ambiguous, and emphasized "my mother's about to di:e?." These latter actions imply a greater certainty of the imminence of the mother's death.

The son also makes his request for compassion fares more urgent by conjoining "**I'm a graduate student and have no:t got much money>"(2-->):**

- With his first call to AA, it was left for the agent to connect his being a "graduate student" with a "poor folk." With US, the son makes this connection explicit.

- He emphasizes "no:t got much money>," perhaps as an upshot of his first call in which the son was unsuccessful in obtaining a good price.

Yet just as son begins to formulate his specific request with "Do you-" (5 -a), he is informed by US that "we really don't have a compassionate fare" but a "bereavement fare." In this way, the son's request is preempted even before it is articulated. The agent's response is shaped as an informing that implicates rejection rather than a rejection of the son's request for other reasons. The agent does not refuse to help the son but displays not being institutionally empowered to offer information about the fare requested. This initial and official response by US attends to institutional offerings while essentially disattending the son's solicitations for consideration of his personal disclosures about a family crisis.

Notice that the agent's preemptive response is receipted by the son with a slightly stretched and downward intoned "Oka[:y," displaying (a) some lingering doubt about just what a "bereavement" fare might be and whether he qualifies for it and (b) *incongruity* between the son's presented case and the preemptive, "official" reply (see Beach, 2002). The son's response, however, is not addressed by the US agent because in overlap, the agent was en route to defining the fare with "And unfortunately <tha:t is when> someone has already passed awa::y.=." With "unfortunately" she displays some sensitivity to the son's dilemma (i.e., mom's dying but not dead) because the fare she is describing is not helpful to the son.

372

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

The son's reaction, an immediate and emphatic "All right," accepts his "nonqualification" status with finality. The son does not respond as though the narrative he presented was treated by the US agent as not compelling. Nor does the son attempt to quibble with having had a request refused or declined, thus pursuing the agent's reconsideration. Instead, the agent continues by further describing that the fare they offer is only for "a fu:neral:," which the son displays acceptance of yet some frustration with his next "Ok(h)a:y [+] TWell fu:neral won't happen 'til after I get there,- I('ve) suppo:se."

Two features of the son's elaboration are of particular interest: (a) how the son's response succinctly states the double bind this leaves him with, namely, that he will likely qualify for the fare offered only after he gets home and his mother dies; and (b) this statement is not just a pursuit of response (see Pomerantz, 1984) but a *venting* of the son's frustration. In this instance, despite the inability of the airlines to assist, the son makes his predicament available for agents by stating "just the facts"-not to provoke or out of hostility but to go on record by indirectly complaining about the lack of fit between the son's dilemma and US's bereavement offering. His actions also make available an opportunity for the agent to provide some sympathetic understanding, and US's "=>I'm: sorry I couldn't help [you]" does apologize for the inability to assist while also withholding a more personal offering of sympathy or concern. A collection of these types of moments are examined more fully in a related paper (see Beach & Lockwood, 2003) in which we argue for the normalcy of agents retaining their institutional character in these and related ways. Notice, however, that the son also displays a recognition of the constraints this agent, as a *bureaucratic representative*, is operating under: He

thanks the agent and, in response to the agent's qualified apology, replies "That's all right. Bye" as the call is terminated.

To summarize, in this second call to US, the son enacts a more deliberate orientation, initially apparent as "compassion fare" is raised as a first item of business. The son also retains recency and urgency, removes ambiguity about the mother's condition, and conjoins his graduate/ money status. Taken together, the son's actions document his having learned from the first AA call in ways allowing for subsequent modifications in narrative presentation. In these ways, the son exhibits a *streamlined* character not apparent in his initial encounter with AA. His enacted and more business-like demeanor, however, does not eliminate but works toward optimization of his personal appeals designed to solicit discounted fares. Nevertheless, because the son is informed that he does not qualify, he becomes subjected to constraints imposed by the US agent as a bureaucratic representative. The son is accepting of the agent's inability to assist and thus does not exhibit having had a reasonable request declined for no good reason. However, he is frustrated (and understandably so) and makes his dilemma available for the agent's hearing in light of her reply-yet without blaming her for it. In response, the son receives an apology for the agent's incapacity to assist rather than personalized sympathy for what son must be undergoing.

Fundamentally, even though the son's problem narrative is itself becoming more routinized, he cannot escape being subjected to institutional criteria for qualifying appropriate customers-an inevitability that the son's own closing remarks seem resigned to acknowledge.

Airline Compassion Fares

373

The Irony of Shortened and Elaborate Problem Narratives

The third airline call in a series, a two-part call to CN, appears in full following:

18) Call #3:Malignancy 8

((The son places his second phone call to CN reservations. The first resulted in his hanging up in response to 4 min of a recorded message. This recording reports that "all of our agents are temporarily busy. Please remain on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received. If you already have a reservation please have your date of travel and flight number available. Thank you."))

The son waits 2:50 from the outset of the recording (see Note 8), and then the agent (CN) comes onto the phone and eventually a Customer Service Manager (SM).

CN: S: CN: S:

43

1/2

CN: S: CN:

Continental Airlines. Linda?

pt.hh Hi. Um (.) got a question for you. [pt] Do you do: such a= -4 [Ok]a:y.

=thing as a com ap:son fa:re.=I just found out my mother's -3 going to die, and I need to get back to San Di o:and I'm a F-1/2

student and I got y little money.

Ok:a:y. Um how soon did you want to travel.=We:ll like tomorro:w. °Tomorrow°. Okay, just a [moment.

374

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

S: [Maybe tomorrow afternoon.
CN: Okay one moment?

((Recording comes on for 00:14; same agent comes back on line))

CN: Okay sir. Thanks for holding [(I'll put a supervisor) on the line= S: [Sure.
CN: =to help you.=
S: Off.
SM: Hello sir. My name is Peter, I'm the customer (.) service manager. How can I [help you.
S: [Hi: well I- I'm tryin to find out something. **I just (.)** F-3
3 -* **r:ceived this wonderful phone call, that it looks like my**
3 -* **mother's gonna die..hhh Uh and I need to: find out. They're -3**
3 - gonna let me know for **sure in the morning, but I think I need to**
3 -4 get back to San Diego from **Austin..hhh** Uh (.) and **I am a E-1/2 1/2 - graduate student, and do not**
have a lot of money. I was told
there -4
4 -4 was such a thing as **compassion fa:res, and that you're one of**
4 - **airlines that offers them.=Is that true? hhhh= SM: =No: we do:n't=**
S: =(O: [k(h)ay.
SM: [(Actually) what we **do: have** is a **fare only (.)** to attend **funerals=**
S: =O:h okay. My misunderstanding then..hhh All right, well **thanks** very much anyway.=
SM: =Thanks fo[r calling.]
S: [Okay.]Bye bye.

Here the son's opening to his problem narrative is designed as an upshot of having been informed, in his call to US, that they don't offer a "compassion fare." He shifts from "**I understand that there is something called a <compassion fare>**" (US), which cites his prior knowledge, to a more direct and even blunt "**Do you do: such a=thing as a compassion fare" (4-)).** This adjustment downplays his understandings in favor of more pragmatic concerns: Does CN do (i.e., offer) these fares or not? Without waiting for response, the son follows his straightforward query with a more quickly produced, concise, and efficient listing of his narrative. His deliberate presentation to US was replete with filled pauses ("Uhm/Um"s) and delivered at a slower pace. This presentation to CN again retains his appeal to recency and unequivocal urgency (3-*). However, it involves no filled pauses, eliminates "graduate student" for an abbreviated "student," and a shortened "**have not got much money>**" (US) to "**I got very little money**" (CN, 1/2-*)-a grammatically incorrect yet basic description that nevertheless encapsulates his dilemma.

It is apparent, therefore, that to this point the son's third call is comparatively simplified and streamlined. His optimizations are natural inclinations for interactions in a series: Each subsequent presentation promotes a more basic, well-organized, and adept portrayal of the basic issues.

In response, however, the agent does not answer the son's initial query about "compassion fares." Rather, and similar to AA's query ("Do you wanna leave uh like leave as soon as possible?"), she asks how soon he wants to travel. Following his response of tomorrow/tomorrow afternoon, CN places him on hold with "Okay one moment?." Once again the son is listening to a recording¹² yet, unbeknownst to him, is soon to be informed that the agent has turned his call over to a supervisor "to help you." It cannot be determined whether, for example, this agent was new on the job and/or simply did not know about such fares and thus required assistance. What is clear, however, is that following the "customer service manager's" institutional greeting and offering of "help," the son is now faced with presenting his case for the *second time* in a single call (his fourth problem narrative thus far).

What emerges is a noticeably longer and more complete problem narrative. Produced specifically for the SM's hearing as a representative in a position of authority, the son constructs his quandary for a recipient he did not choose yet who is capable of granting special assistance/discounted fares he is pursuing. After stating he is "tryin to find out something," notice that the son also begins this narrative ironically: "**I just (.) r:ceived this wonderful phone call, that it looks like my mother's gonna die**" (3-4). It is possible that this irony, the only instance produced by the son across

all airline calls, is triggered by the son's just prior listening to a recording describing alluring vacation opportunities, which stand, of course, in stark contrast to his reasons for calling the airline to address a family crisis (see Note 8). Interactionally, however, this ironic opening is recruited by the son in three related ways.

First, the opening is produced in a manner similar to how speakers invoke *idiomatic expressions* (Beach, 1993, 1996; Drew & Holt, 1988; Jefferson, 1996), namely, in environments where producers treat others as potentially withholding sympathy and/or affiliation to a complaint and/or problem. The son's opening of his second problem narrative is designed to garner the SM's support in the very face of the irony he is proposing: Clearly, there is nothing "wonderful" about receiving an unsolicited call

376

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

sated with bad news, and the son employs his ironic expression in a self-effacing manner.

Second, as an enactment of what Goffman (1961) conceptualized regarding "role enactments"

... by introducing an unserious style, the individual can project the claim that nothing happening at the moment to him or through him should be taken as a direct reflection of him, but rather of the person-in-situation that he is mimicking. ... Sullenness, mut

tering, irony, joking, and sarcasm may all allow one to show that something of oneself lies outside the constraints of the moment and outside the role within whose jurisdiction the moment occurs. (pp. 105, 115)

We have emphasized how the son is caught up displaying being a person in need of help. He also exhibits for the SM's recognition that although he is aware of the dilemma he is embroiled within, he is not totally consumed by it-at least to the extent that he cannot (at least momentarily) be unserious or ironic.

Third, in producing such an ironic utterance, the son employs an alternative device for deformalizing this call. In a troubles-resistant manner, he puts on hold more explicit displays of his emotional concerns and by so doing distances himself from the predicament within which he is embroiled. Sometimes when a troubles teller is referring to a topic that might "reoccasion tears," he or she may replace an emotional description "with a description biased toward less than serious treatment. ... He is exhibiting that, although there is this trouble, it is not getting the better of him; he is managing" (Jefferson, 1984a, pp. 351, 353; 1984b; 1988). Yet by exhibiting the prerogative to treat his dilemma lightly, the son also invites the SM to be even more receptive to the troubles he is experiencing.

At the completion of the son's narrative is "**I was told there was such a thing as compassion fa:res, and that you're one of airlines that offers them.=Is that true?**" (4-*)). This utterance stands in marked contrast to his earlier query designed for CN, "**Do you do: such a = thing as a compassion fa:re.**" Similar to calls with AA and US, the son relies again on "I was told" but here ends with "Is that true?." By citing other sources, the son creates for himself an "out" should he come off as misinformed (see Bergmann, 1993). Indeed, such is the case. Immediately SM responds with an emphatic and blunt "**No: we do:n't.**" Following the son's somewhat incongruous "**0::[k(h)ay]**" (see Beach, 2003), which (like the US call) may have but did not occasion an already-launched explanation by SM about "funerals," the son marks the SM's informing as news, acknowledges his misunderstanding, and thanks him anyway. Unlike the call to US, however, the son neither verbalizes his dilemma nor solicits the SM's sympathy for what are obviously troubling circumstances. His passing on doing so may itself be an upshot of having already attempted, and failed, to solicit personalized support from the US agent. In absence of this recognition, SM does not offer an apology (like US) but a reciprocated "Thanks for calling." as the call moves to closing.

Airline Compassion Fares

377

There is an irony about the son's repeated efforts-shortened and efficient, as with CN, and more elaborate when speaking with SM-in that despite his adaptations from prior calls and ongoing claims for urgency, these efforts have essentially been to no avail. When airlines don't offer *compassion fares*, there is apparently little business to transact and calls quickly move to closing. In essence, data thus far reveal one lay person's journeying through airline industry offerings requiring, at the very least, an articulation of his personal circumstances without assurance of receiving cost-effective and timely

compensation. Also, as noted, agents have withheld stating sympathy and compassion for his dilemma.

Streamlining the Problem Narrative

A portion of the fourth and final call, to SW, appears following:

19) Call#4:Malignancy 9

SW: Good evening? Thank you for calling Southwest Airlines? This is Jessica. How may I help you?
S: 4 -a Hi? **Do you have such a thing as what they call a ≤com a::ssion fare.**
3 **-* (.) Um- I just found out it looks like my mother's gonna die? and I**
3 **-- need to get back to San Diego from A:ustin (.) Texas. and I'm a**
1/2 **-* graduate student and do not have a lot of money.**
S w: Let me check and see: umm (.) exactly what the fares: would be.: I know we do not have anything like that.
S: Okay?
SW: Our fares are usually much less than u:h American, Delta, (.) people like that.
S: All right.

378

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

SW: S:
S w: S: SW:

S: SW:

S:

SW: S:

Ah the normal fare sir is one thirty three one way? Okay.

Are you under twenty two.

No., I'm twenty seven.=

= >All right sir.< You might want to try um (2.5) u- um America West.

Okay.

They may have ah- is it a passion fare or bereavance fare. Something like tha: [t. =

= [Yeah ah- there's a couple places that °will° do this when (.) if I want to go for a funeral? But I'd just as soon get there before she dies and [that's] =

[R:ight.]

= a matter of days at this point. And um hhh

((Agent and son continue to talk about fares, other airlines, and scheduling.))

In this fifth problem narrative, the son retains his initial and direct inquiry addressing the root issue underlying his calls: "compassion fares." This narrative is the most complete and succinct of the five. Exact information is provided for the SW agent, but little more, and produced not just in an assembly line but a list-construction manner (see Jefferson, 1990). Pauses and dysfluencies are essentially absent as the son constructs his narrative. This presentation is indicative of the son becoming climatized to encounters with airline agents. As such, the information that the son offers about specific matters (e.g., his mother's dying and lack of money) have become increasingly refined and

shaped, presented less as affective displays of urgent need and more as list components necessary to meet institutional requirements.

The son's actions are now efficiently built in an order tailored to SW's needs: Request for information, urgency, locations, and cost. This recipient-designed ordering can be understood as a natural evolution of presentational skills, designed with airline requirements *in mind* yet adapted to the precise contingencies of his SW encounter.

Next, SW responds to the son's narrative by informing him that she will check the fares and then stating that she knows SW does not have a compassion fare. The son stays on the line at this juncture to hear what fares would amount to, even though SW does not have *compassion fares* per se, and is soon told that SW fares "are usually much less" than other airlines. This is quickly confirmed: The normal fare is \$133, what amounts to a \$60 round-trip savings over AA's quoted compassion rates.

Despite these savings, the agent next suggests that son try a competitor, "America West." *Because the agent treats as primary not the selling of a SW ticket to this customer, but the best possible price for a man faced with a family crisis, priority is given to the son's needs.* Notice also that her references to

"passion fare or bereavance fare" are not accurate. She exhibits being uninformed of alternative fares, concluding with "Something like tha: [t.," which the son next treats as a teaching moment rooted in his residual experiences: Without correcting her inaccuracies, he simply informs her of the difference between "funeral" fares and the option of "get[ting] there before she dies," an obvious preference for him that is acknowledged by the agent. The call then continues with an extended discussion of travel details.

EPILOGUE: COMPASSION FARES REVISITED

Prior analysis has made clear how the son's conversations, prior to calling the airlines and particularly with his dad and aunt, strongly influenced his preoccupation with and search for *compassion fares* when speaking with airline representatives. We now examine the final call in the series: A conversation with his Aunt, a flight attendant who initially informed the son and his dad that "compassion fares" were available and provided the lowest discounted rates. This excerpt begins as the son somewhat delicately draws his aunt's attention, "for professional curiosity sake," to what amounts to his assessment that she was basically misinformed about the advice she was offering:

20) Call#5:Malignancy 10:4

S: Yeah, (.) hh interestingly jus- just because um (.) for professional curiosity sake I thought you'd be interested to know this. (.) Ahh um most of these places that do (.) what you're
1 - calling compassion fares >oh there they are hhh don't do it until the person is already dead.< (.) They do it for funerals. (.) The only one that did it (.) for these kind of circumstances that I found was American.

A: Yeah. =

S: 2 - ~ = hhh But Southwest because of (.) being Southwest actually was cheaper. (.) hhh I can buy ah on the spot one-way ticket from Southwest hhh a- and then just buy another on the spot one way ticket when I'm done and come back (.) and still have it come up (.) to be hhh A::h hhh let's see ((mumbling)) hh seventy dollars cheaper than American Airlines (.) compassion fares (.) so-

380

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

A: 3 -* Well that is why I gave you the infor[mation.]

S: [hhh] Yeah I- I called
4 -* about six places hhh and hh th- the details would be uhh I would leave here two twenty my time go through Phoenix end up there five thirty your time.

A: 5 -~ Uh hmm Okay. (.) Alright. Uhm by- I would- (.) the way <normally> things work with Dr. Wylie is she makes rounds in the morning. S: 5-4 Um hmm. Yeah that's what dad said.=

What can be gleaned from this excerpt has little to do with the aunt's reception of the son's update. She fails to acknowledge any culpability for her actions (3-*), which were no doubt well intended

despite being inaccurate. Rather, what is provided by the son and thus available for analysis is a capsulized and retrospective summary of his just completed airline experiences. In less than 1 min, the son sketches the "gist" of his efforts: compassion versus bereavement fares (1-a), SW's offering of cheaper and convenient tickets (2-a), and his eventual flight schedule (4-~).

The son begins (1 -*) by describing a key distinction he has learned between "compassion" and "bereavement" fares—the latter being for "funerals" and thus not applicable to the son's need to promptly travel home to be with his mom and family. It is somewhat curious that the son would, essentially, be educating a flight attendant on such fare distinctions. Yet, as we earlier noted how SW's agent mispronounced "passion fare or bereavance fare," there is no guarantee that those working for the airlines are fully knowledgeable about the full range of services offered. In this sense, a lay person (the son) can emerge as more of an expert than some airline employees.

The knowledge undergirding the son's expertise is also apparent in (2-a) in which SW is overviewed as both cheaper and more convenient than AA, the only "compassion fare" offered by any of the airlines he called. Following the aunt's disavowal (3-), the son next summarizes by stating "Yeah I- I called about six places" before offering his flight details including late afternoon arrival (4-). In (5-4), the aunt next updates the son about when mom's doctor "makes rounds in the morning," which the son acknowledges and informs her "that's what dad said."

DISCUSSION

Being in a crisis, and even bereaved, is rarely a matter of personal choice. Difficult circumstances emerge throughout the course of daily affairs, events that may be anticipated but at times arrive unexpectedly. These exigencies set into motion a series of practical activities that would (if choice were an option) be otherwise avoided altogether. Yet when individuals are faced with the need to make last-minute and thus unforeseen travel plans to visit dying family members, it becomes necessary to arrange affordable and timely airline reservations. The interactions examined herein provide a glimpse of one family's attempts to manage such activities across a series of family phone calls (involving a son, mom, dad, and aunt) as well as encounters with several airline agents.

We have attempted to address how the son worked in unison with his mom and dad to make key travel decisions, how he subsequently makes his case to airline agents, and reconstructions (to the aunt) of these airline experiences. Particular attention has been given to *the serial organization and cumulative impact of calls over time*. By examining specific features of how the son initiated and elaborated calls with airline agents delicately from "Hi -4 question for you ~ [problem narrative]"-attention has been given to *not just request making and yes-no compliance, but attempts to (a) make the case for being qualified for discounted rates (i, e., meeting institutional criteria for a 'fare category') and b) eliciting understandings from agents who might therefore accommodate the son with timely and discounted fares*.

Beginning with the son's initial calls to mom and dad, the ontogenesis of his personal decision and commitment to travel were laid bare. Also pressing were inherent uncertainties surrounding death and dying and thus an urgent need to be with his mom and family. Clearly, no analysis of these interactionally sensitive moments can adequately capture such complex and unsettling circumstances faced by family members; the obvious and personal turmoil experienced by each family member can never be fully encapsulated. However, it has been possible to trace how the son enacted (and agents responded) to a form of *urgency* comprising the son's airline calls.

The initial and most apparent influence on these airline calls was the son's being informed by his aunt and dad that "compassion fares" existed and should be pursued. From these family encounters, we have identified the interactional foundation and base components of the son's subsequent "problem narratives": *being a graduate student, with little money, who just found out his mother is dying, who is aware of "compassion fares" and needs to find out if each airline offers such discounted fares*. It is indeed rare to have access to materials revealing the interactional roots of what eventually amounts to a "presentation format." Also, whenever any

son's encounter with SW, then, that forces reflection on what, pragmatically speaking, *is really meaningful about compassion fares* (see also Note 2). It is paradoxical that even when *compassion fares* per se are not offered, as with SW, services rendered can far exceed programs built for the explicit purpose of helping customers embroiled in the trials and tribulations surrounding death and dying of family members.

A Final Note: Managing Ongoing Uncertainties

We bring this article to close with yet another irony faced by the son and his family: After all the efforts to arrange travel plans, so apparent in interactions examined herein, *the son does not travel home to be with his dying mother and family until weeks later* Within 24 hr, following the call with his aunt, he received another call from dad: know whether to be ple:ased or not ple\$ased [Shah hh\$]," a disclaimer marked with laughter that the son shares in his disbelieving response.

In retrospect, it can be determined that mom does not die for an additional 6 weeks. This is the case even though doctors, who advised mom and dad to contact the son and urge his travel, anticipated a high probability of mom's soon and imminent death. Yet doctors can be and frequently are wrong. Just as hindsight is a 20-20 resource, not applicable to future events, so too is it an understatement to note that death is difficult to predict. However, if and when experts believe death is imminent, and even the patient (mom) concurs, what else is a family to do but arrange their lives as *if* mom were dying sooner rather than later?¹³ These are only some of the exigencies giving rise to calling the airlines in search for unrestricted and discounted *compassion fares*.

NOTES

Here it is clear that, and how, *uncertainty* is realized and evident in practical actions (see also Beach, 2001; Beach & Good, in press). As dad updates and announces to the son that he should "stay there," the reaction amounts to a mixture of frustration and relief. Dad himself states "ya don't

family crises and so too may an array of Web sites providing updated information on discounted and efficient travel (e.g., a search with key terms *bereavement fares* will produce a long listing of such options). Given that the phone calls examined herein were collected in 1988 to 1989, Internet access was not an option. Yet it is an interesting and common feature of these Web sites that recognition is made of travelers' troubling circumstances. One Web site noted that "Dealing with travel plans in the face of the death or illness of a loved one is incredibly difficult" (IndependentTraveler.com). Also, in an article titled "Getting Home Soon: Finding the Best Bereavement Fares," ABCNews.com observed that "When you're faced with the critical illness or death of a family member in a distant city, negotiating a good air fare is the farthest thing from your mind. ... Sad as the subject may be to contemplate, a little advance thinking can save you a great deal of worry and money should the need arise."

The *offering* of discounted fares, designed by airlines to accommodate urgent situations involving family illness or death, need not be synonymous with *receiving* the lowest and most convenient fares. If possible, customers are encouraged to shop around for cheaper discount tickets because prices and travel restrictions vary widely across major airlines. Even though airlines often wave advance and full-fare prices to assist travelers, less expensive fares can still be found (see Jeffrey, 2000). Nevertheless, many family members simply do not have the time to shop fares in times of crisis and thus rely on calls to the airlines to solicit information about reduced rates. Unfortunately, in their haste, many people fail to request information on bereavement or compassion fares, let alone seek cheaper rates from other airlines. Ironically, reduced rates may be offered by the same airline due to sales promotions in particular markets. For these and related reasons, "the majors are not going to give you a deal you might deem compassionate" (Parsons, 2002, p. 1).

22) Malignancy 12:1

S: A::Iri::ght? What's the scoop. hhh =

D: =TWe::11 (.) s there.

S: Stay here. hh

D: Stay there. =

S: = hh Oh::y hh hh o-Tokay. hh =

D: = Ye::ah I know. This >been a damn up an down an up an down.<

I °ya know° ya- ya don't know whether to be p:le:ased
or not ple\$ased [Shah hh\$]

2

S: [Shuh hh\$] hhhh=

D: [Hu::m.]

S: [hhhh]

(1.0)

D: Hhhh hhh <I d:o:n't kno:w ye.t.> (1.1) Ya know, the trip was

gonna come about. It's just that ya know (.) i::f ya wanna
come this week, this is not gonna be an e:nd week kinda
thing. . hhh So::o, (.) your mother's answer was na:h stay
there ya know. She's- she? is 'Tmuch better this morning,
((continues by talking about what the doctor said))

1 In addition to phone calls directly to the airlines, travel agents may be consulted during

388

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood

- 3 In a second article, Beach and Lockwood (2003) analyzed subsequent moments throughout these calls when the son describes his dilemma to airline representatives in ways that continue to (a) make the case for being a person in need of help and requiring special assistance and (b) solicit special understanding (e.g., legitimacy or sympathy) regarding his personal circumstances. Airline agents' responses to the son's compassion-seeking activities are also examined.
- 4 Our analysis might usefully be compared to Maynard's (1997, 2003) work on News Delivery Sequences (NDSs). Although news informings display universal and even canonical features, such features are neither dependant on the events themselves nor rigidly enacted. Rather, news deliveries and their receipts are part of a generic NDS through which participants assemble matters or events in the world as *news for them* of a particular kind. Produced contingently in real time, NDSs as well as the son's narratives get coenacted within and across turns at talk through the mutual articulation of in-course interactional adjustments.
- 5 Recent work on the interactional organization of survey interviews (see Maynard, Houtkoop-Stenstra, Schaeffer, & van der Zouwen, 2002; Maynard & Schaeffer, 1997, 2002a) reveals how interviewers proactively work to insure respondents' participation and how it is *call recipients* who are in the position to grant or decline requests to respond to telephone surveys: "It is 'citizens' or household members, rather than members of some institution or organization, who are keeping the gate" (Maynard & Schaeffer, 2002a, p. 201). In marked contrast, airline agents are gatekeepers in the calls we examine. As recipients of the son's calls, agents represent institutions that regulate service offerings (i.e., fares, prices, and scheduling). It is the son who works to persuasively make requests in pursuit of their being granted rather than declined, who initiates such actions as "personalizing the opening of the call," and even behaves in ways akin to "soliciting a favor." Our data, then, allow for interesting comparisons with telephone surveys, especially grounded understandings of the "front end" of calls and how requests are made, responded to, and dealt with throughout assorted encounters.
- 6 Formal permission was granted by the family and approved through appropriate Human Subjects Committee reviews. Family members include the son, father, mother, daughter, aunt, and grandmother. The corpus also includes an assortment of other conversations between the son and his (separated) wife, her brother, representatives from various airlines, an academic counseling office receptionist, a receptionist at an animal boarding kennel (when making and canceling reservations for his dog during his travel), a woman the son had begun dating, an old friend from the Midwest, a graduate student who covered the son's classes during travel, and a variety of other calls involving routine daily occurrences (e.g., the payment of bills, leaving messages on phone answering machines).
- 7 The inherent uncertainties associated with death and dying represent unrivaled mysteries defining the human condition. The vast spiritual, religious, clinical, and palliative literature addressing how people make sense of, cope with, and communicate about death and dying cannot be adequately summarized here (but see Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kristjanson and Ashcroft, 1994). Nor can we, as analysts, do justice to the sensitivities of such revealing family moments. We can, however, draw attention to two key features: (a) progress is being made on examining how "uncertainties about illness" are inherently communicative and interactively constructed (see Beach, 1993, 2(x)1; Beach & Good, in press; Babrow, Kasch, & Ford, 1998; Lutfey & Maynard, 1998), and (b) inserted into mom's emphatic "I

don't know" is her "I'm () not done it." This is an obvious statement, of course, but raises a fascinating and complex set of issues addressed (in part) in a patient-narrated video titled *I've Never Died Before* (Kaiser Permanente, Department of Preventive Medicine, San Diego, 1999).

Airline Compassion Fares

389

8 There is distinct irony in the son's listening to soothing classical music mixed with intermittent recorded messages—invitations to "Make it a memorable Christmas" by traveling to St. Thomas, or nonstop service and easier routes to Honduras, Scandinavia, or other world destinations—standing in marked contrast to the family business the son needs to attend to, hearably receipted by the son with loud "sighs" giving rise to hanging up the phone and calling the next airline on his list (US).

9 Maynard and Schaeffer (2002b) described a single instance in which a survey interviewer engages in tailoring the script: "Tailoring is facilitated at the front end of the interview because interviewers are not required to adhere strictly to a standard introduction" (p. 220). Rather than stating "Hello, I'm Bob Roth calling from Indiana University," the interviewer stated, "Hi my name's Bob Roth, I'm calling from Indiana University." The observation is made that the latter format is an instance of "personalizing" a call. In contrast, it is not known, however, whether the SW agent had an actual written script to follow (as did the survey interviewer). What can be noted is that it departs from the three prior agents' introductions and greetings. The son next (in all cases) designs his response in consideration of these specific features.

10 These "Hi"s may be usefully contrasted with a caller's "Yes," which briefly confirms receipt of the call takers opening identification immediately prior to requesting assistance:

[CDV31 B-A/080: D = Dispatcher, C = Caller] (M. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 176)

D: Nine one one emergency.

(0.6)

C: Yes, I need a towing truck (continues)

11 When examining how survey interviewers improvise telephone "scripts," Maynard & Schaeffer (2002b) noted the following:

The crafting of his opening talk, and its departure from the more conventional script, can be working interactionally in at least two ways. First, "May I please ..." occasions the relevance of a straightforward yes-no answer as a reply to the request for an interview, whereas "we'd like a chance ..." implicates different answering options, in particular the granting or withholding of an opportunity. (p. 227)

With the son's case making to airline agents, pursued answers have less to do with "granting or withholding of an opportunity" in favor of being treated as a legitimate candidate for receiving discounted fares.

12 Once again, as noted in Note 8 (above), this 14-sec recording encouraged the son to consider traveling to distant and exotic travel locations for vacations that, as noted, stand in marked contrast to demands arising from his urgent family business.

13 The son also is involved with a series of calls with his separated wife about his pending travel home, news updates about the mom's and son's condition analyzed in Beach (2001).

390

Wayne A. Beach and Alane S. Lockwood
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