Students’ Primary Goals, Attributions, and Facework During Conversations About Disappointing Grades

Christina M. Sabee, & Steven R. Wilson

Students talk with teachers about disappointing grades for different reasons, and the way students frame such interactions has consequences for how those interactions are likely to unfold. To explore students’ primary goals in such interactions, 234 undergraduates reported on a recent conversation with an instructor about a lower-than-desired grade. Three different primary goals (learning, persuading, and fighting) initially were postulated, and a fourth (impressing) emerged from students’ responses. Differences in students’ primary goals for talking with their instructors were related to the attributions that they made for the low grade as well as to different face-threatening acts and politeness strategies they enacted during the interaction with their instructor. Findings illustrate how the primary goal framework can be extended into the instructional communication context, reveal that primary goals are not necessarily instrumental, and suggest that instructors would benefit from learning how to diagnose and negotiate with students about primary goals.

Keywords: Goals; Grades; Attributions; Politeness; Facework; Instructional Communication

Conversations about disappointing grades can be anxiety-provoking for students and teachers. Students become emotionally involved in their grades, and hence in conversations about their grades (e.g., Goulden & Griffin, 1995; Janzow & Eison, 1989).
1990; Smith & Price, 1996). Teachers often find interactions about grades uncomfortable, especially when students ask that their grades be changed (Svinicki, 1998). Although a good deal of research has focused on implications of teacher–student interaction for learning (e.g., Richmond & McCroskey, 1992; Salinen-Kuperinen, 1992), very little research has focused specifically on conversations about grades. This omission is noteworthy, since how students think and talk about a disappointing grade may affect their ability and willingness to learn in the future (Dweck, 2000), and their identity management practice may also be linked to their motivation and the kinds of facework that they perceive from their teachers in the classroom (e.g., Kerssen-Griep, 2001).

We analyze students’ interactions with teachers about grades by applying Dillard’s (1990; Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989) concept of primary goals. Students talk with teachers about grades for different reasons, and the way students frame such interactions has consequences for how those interactions are likely to unfold. After defining the primary goal construct, we review prior theory and research suggesting that students may frame interactions about disappointing grades in terms of specific primary goals. Then, we explore attribution dimensions that may predict which primary goal a student will pursue as well as different face-threatening acts and politeness strategies that may be associated with different primary goals.

**Primary Goals and Grades**

*Defining Primary Goals*

Goals, in conversation, refer to desired states that individuals hope to bring about through or during interaction. Goal perspectives presume that communicators are purposeful, but not necessarily that goals are formed in a fashion that is mindful (Kellermann, 1992), free of emotion (Burleson & Planalp, 2000), or socially appropriate (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). It is widely accepted that individuals pursue multiple, and often competing, goals during face-to-face interaction (Tracy, 1991; Wilson, 2002). Among these, Dillard (1990; Dillard et al., 1989) distinguishes primary and secondary goals. At any point in a conversation, an individual’s primary goal is the objective that defines the situation, or answers the question, “What is going on here?” The primary goal plays a framing function; it “brackets the situation” and “helps segment the flow of behavior into a meaningful unit; it says what the interaction is about” (Dillard et al., 1989, p. 21). The primary goal also exerts a “push” force, and thus motivates the actor to speak. Secondary goals, in contrast, exert a “pull” force, by shaping and constraining what the actor says and does.

The labels “primary” and “secondary” refer to the functions and directional force of goals, rather than to goal content or importance. Because of this, the same motivation may serve as a primary or a secondary goal in different contexts. Concerns about “face” (Goffman, 1967) shape and constrain how actors pursue many primary goals. That is, face concerns function as secondary goals in most interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kellermann, 1992; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). Yet
when an individual commits a faux pas, regaining face itself may for the moment be what the interaction is about (i.e., the primary goal). Even when face concerns function as secondary goals, those concerns may be seen as much more important than the primary goal and thus lead an actor to refrain from, or cease, pursuing that goal (Dillard, 1990). A focus on primary goals encourages investigation of different ways that actors may frame an interaction, and thus have different “approach” motivations.

Research on primary goals typically has focused on influence or instrumental goals. Using varied methods, several typologies of common primary goals involving influence have been proposed in both interpersonal and organizational contexts (e.g., Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994; Yukl, Guinan, & Sottolano, 1995). Extending these studies, Schrader and Dillard (1998) demonstrated that 14 primary goals involving influence vary in the degree to which they are associated with a smaller or larger set of secondary goals. Wilson and colleagues (e.g., Cai & Wilson, 2000; Wilson et al., 1998) showed that three common primary goals involving influence—asking a favor, giving advice, and enforcing an unfulfilled obligation—each are associated with a unique set of potential face threats that are understood similarly across sex, nationality, ethnicity, and relationship type. More recently, Kunkel, Wilson, Olufowote, and Robson (2003) have analyzed three primary goals involving relational (re)definition—initiating, intensifying, or ending a romantic relationship—and shown that each goal is associated with a unique set of potential face threats. No one to date, however, has cataloged primary goals that reflect different reasons students might discuss a disappointing grade with an instructor, yet these types of goals may be quite useful in understanding more about such a prevalent and important conversation.

Primary Goals for Grade Conversations

The contextual nature of primary goals led us to propose three possible primary goals that students might have when discussing a disappointing grade: learning, persuading, and fighting. The first two goals were distinguished based on prior literature about achievement goals. Dweck and colleagues (e.g., Dweck, 2000; Hong, Dweck, Chui, Lin, & Wan, 1999) suggest that, in achievement situations, students may have performance or learning goals that affect how they are motivated. When students have a learning goal, their objective is to focus on increasing their own competence. In contrast, students with a performance goal focus on receiving positive judgments about their competence and avoiding negative judgments.

Broad achievement goals may relate to specific interaction goals that students have during particular conversations about negative grades. For example, students might have learning as their primary interaction goal, or defining purpose, while discussing a grade with their teacher. In such cases, they would view the interaction with the teacher as one in which they want to better understand, or develop a plan for better understanding, the material on which they received a disappointing grade. In contrast, students who focus on their immediate performance evaluation might have persuading as their primary objective when talking with their teachers; for example,
they may argue that their grade on the assignment under discussion should be raised from a C+ to a B−. Students with learning goals may hope that one by-product of better understanding the material is that their grades on future assignments will improve. Unlike students with persuading goals, however, those with learning goals do not view the interaction with the teacher as a negotiation about their grade on the current assignment.

Aside from learning and persuading, we also suggest fighting as a third possible primary goal. Students often are emotionally involved in their grades, and receiving a negative grade is frustrating for them. Students may harbor anger toward their instructor for a grade they feel is unfair and thus have fighting goals, in which they want to vent frustration or attack their teacher’s face (Newell & Stutman, 1988; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). Students with fighting goals may be too angry to focus on better understanding the material or negotiating a better grade, or believe it is unlikely that their current grade will be changed or that they will grasp future course material. These students do not approach their teacher for what seems to be a “rational” reason from the perspective of those with learning or persuading goals; rather, their purpose is more affect-based. Students with fighting goals are responding to a perceived injustice and want to vent frustration. Based on this reasoning, we propose

H1: Students’ descriptions of their primary goal during a conversation with a teacher about a disappointing grade will include examples of learning, persuading, and fighting goals.

RQ1: Will students report additional primary goals during conversations with a teacher about a disappointing grade?

Attributions and Primary Goals

The way in which students frame the purpose of discussions about lower-than-expected grades may depend, in part, on their attributions about why they received the low grade. We draw on Weiner’s (1986) attribution theory, because it specifies links between attributions and emotions as well as between attributions and behavior through both motivation and emotion. According to Weiner, individuals make attributions along three different dimensions: locus (internal–external), stability (stable–unstable), and controllability (controllable–uncontrollable). A person’s judgment of where the cause for a low grade falls along these dimensions should influence her/his emotional reactions, motivation to continue trying, and hence behavior.

Research on achievement suggests that individuals vary in terms of the locus and stability dimensions (Curtis, 1992; Smith & Price, 1996; Weiner, 1986). High-achieving people typically make internal and unstable attributions (e.g., lack of effort) for their poor performance, whereas underachievers tend to attribute failures to external and stable causes (Smith & Price, 1996). Those who attribute continued failure to internal and stable factors may suffer from learned helplessness in which they feel a sense of uncontrollability about recurring aversive events and give up trying (Dweck, 2000). Further, the controllability dimension elicits feelings of anger
or pity, meaning that an individual may feel anger about a negative incident that was controlled by another, or pity about a negative event over which no one has control (Hargrett, 1981; Weiner, 1986).

Several researchers presume that attributions are one set of preconditions that affects what interaction goals people form. Wilson’s (1990) cognitive rules model of interaction goals argues that people associate goals with specific situational conditions, including attributions. MacGeorge (2001) showed that attributions for negative events explained significant variance in support related interaction goals. Given that attributions and goals are linked, and that individuals differ in the type of attributions they tend to make for poor performance, we predict

H2: The specific primary goal students recall having had during the interaction with their instructor will be associated with the attributions they have made for the disappointing grade along the locus, stability, and controllability dimensions.

Face, Politeness, and Primary Goals

The way students frame conversations about disappointing grades in terms of primary goals is likely to have consequences for what they say and do when talking with their instructor. Pursuit of any primary goal has implications for both parties’ face. Face refers to the social image that an individual claims during interaction with others (Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) subdivide face into two wants: to be socially affirmed by significant others (positive face) and to be autonomous from constraint (negative face).

Although conversationalists have motivations to support each other’s face, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that many actions by definition threaten either a speaker’s or the hearer’s face. Students may perform a variety of face-threatening acts (FTAs) during discussions with teachers about disappointing grades. By asking an instructor to raise the grade initially received on an assignment or to spend time tutoring outside of class, a student constrains the instructor’s negative face. A student who claims that an assignment was too difficult, covered inappropriate material, or was graded unfairly threatens the instructor’s positive face. By admitting that he or she did not prepare adequately for an exam, a student threatens his or her own positive face. By promising to spend more time studying course material in the future, a student constrains his or her own negative face.

Students may be willing, or feel compelled, to perform different FTAs depending on their primary goal. Students who have either a learning or a persuading goal are likely to constrain the instructor’s negative face—the former by asking the instructor to spend additional time outside of class, the latter by asking for a grade change. Students with a learning goal may be more likely than those with a persuading or fighting goal to constrain their own future autonomy by promising to spend more time and effort studying course material. Students with a fighting goal should be likely to repeatedly threaten the instructor’s positive face, since they view the point of the interaction as attacking the instructor’s face. Thus, we predict
H3: The type of FTAs which students report enacting during conversations about disappointing grades will be associated with their primary goal.

H4: Students whose primary goal is fighting will perform a larger number of FTAs than will those whose primary goal is either learning or persuading.

Primary goals have implications not only for what types of FTAs students are likely to perform, but also for what types of politeness strategies they are likely to employ. Students who perform FTAs when talking with an instructor about a disappointing grade do so under conditions that amplify the magnitude of face threat. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that any given FTA communicates greater threat when the speaker (a) shares a distant rather than a close relationship with the hearer and (b) has little power relative to the hearer. Both conditions may be present in the undergraduate classroom, since instructors may not know their students well, and themselves have the power to assign grades in the future. Hence, one would expect students to utilize politeness strategies in an attempt to avoid or mitigate threat to their teacher’s face.

According to politeness theory, speakers have five options when contemplating an FTA. Ranging from least to most polite, these are: (a) perform the FTA baldly, on record, without redress; (b) perform the FTA using positive politeness; (c) perform the FTA with negative politeness; (d) perform the FTA off-record, and (e) do not perform the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 65–68). Everything else being equal, the theory assumes that speakers will employ increasingly polite strategies as the magnitude of their FTA increases. If students with divergent primary goals perform different FTAs, the variation in their FTAs suggests that they will utilize divergent politeness strategies as well.

Although recognizing that conversationalists have reciprocal motivations to maintain each other’s face, other scholars argue that individuals at times may purposefully avoid using politeness, or use explicitly face-threatening language, in an intentional attempt to attack face (Wilson, 1990; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). If sufficiently angry, or if the low grade was received on an assignment near the end of a course (thus reducing the likelihood that the complaining student will need to continue a relationship with that instructor), students with fighting goals may forgo politeness. Thus:

H5: The type of politeness strategies which students report enacting during conversations about disappointing grades will be associated with their primary goal.

H6: Students whose primary goal is fighting, on average, will use lower-level politeness strategies compared to students whose primary goal is either learning or persuading.

Method

Participants

A total of 234 usable responses were obtained from a pool of 247 students fulfilling a required assignment for a class in interpersonal communication at a large
Midwestern university, plus 22 additional college student volunteers. Fifty-eight percent were female. Data were collected via an Internet administration protocol that ensured only one submission per qualified participant.

**Procedures**

Students were contacted initially with a face-to-face meeting during which the study was explained and consent forms were signed. Participants accessed the questionnaire by going to a specified website where they were prompted to “consider a recent conversation in which you talked with one of your instructors about a grade on an assignment that you felt was lower than you desired.” They were asked to describe the conversation in as much detail as they could remember by filling in sections of text that corresponded to what they said and what their instructor said. They also were asked to respond to open-ended questions about when and where the conversation occurred, who was present, what they thought were causes of the negative grade, what the most important cause was for the negative grade, what the outcome of the conversation was, and whether they were satisfied with that outcome. Further, respondents were asked to write out as many goals for that conversation as they remembered having and then to identify which of those goals was “primary” or “most descriptive”. Finally, respondents were asked to answer 9 items concerning their attributions for the negative grade (Russell, 1982).

**Instruments and Measures**

*Primary Goals*

Participants were asked to write out as many goals for their recalled conversation as they remembered having, both going into the conversation and after the conversation started. Then, they were asked to indicate “Of the goals that you just listed, which of them best describes what your conversation with your instructor was about? In other words, what was your main goal during this conversation?” The participant’s primary goal was determined by coding his/her response to this question. Using open-ended primary goal data to test the hypotheses reduces shared methods variance with attributions for the low grade because the latter was measured via rating scales. The dichotomy of the open-ended data also is consistent with the assumption adopted here that people, at any given moment, frame an interaction to be about just one primary goal.

After initially reading responses from 25% of the sample, we developed a coding manual that included definitions and examples of learning, persuading, and fighting goals (see Appendix). The first author, and a second coder who was masked to the research hypotheses, independently classified 25% of participants as having the primary goal of “learning,” “persuading” or “fighting.” An “other” category also was included in order to account for emergent goals in the data. Results from these initial steps of coding revealed that most responses were accurately reflected by the three
predicted goals. Inspection of the “other” category, however, suggested that one other prominent goal should be included in our analysis. Specifically, some respondents indicated that their primary goal was to repair or advance their projected self-image in the eyes of their instructor (see Appendix). Hence, “impressing” goals were added as a fourth primary goal type.

The first author and the same second coder next independently coded another 25% of the open-ended responses into five primary goal categories (learning, persuading, fighting, impressing, other) to check intercoder agreement. Intercoder agreement was Cohen’s kappa = 0.89. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion, and the entire data set was coded using this five-category system. Of the entire sample, a total of 12 responses were placed in the “other” category. These responses did not share any specific features; hence, participants whose primary goal was coded into the “other” category were excluded from all analyses involving primary goals (n = 222 for analyses involving primary goals).

Attributions

Participants initially listed all of the causes they thought were responsible for their disappointing grade, after which they selected the single cause from all those present that they viewed as the most important reason for their negative grade. Participants were prompted to complete an attribution measure composed of nine 9-point semantic differential scales that tap a respondent’s attributions for an event along three dimensions: locus, controllability and stability. The scale was slightly adapted from Russell’s (1982) original to better reflect the “disappointing grade” situation, such as changing the referent from “cause(s)” to a singular “cause” and making the item more specific to the negative grade cause. For instance, a locus item in Russell’s (1982) scale, “Is the cause(s) something that reflects an aspect of: 1 = Yourself, 9 = The Situation” was changed to read “Is the cause for the low grade something that reflects an aspect of: 1 = Yourself, 9 = The Situation”. Sample stability and controllability items were, respectively, “Is the cause for the low grade something that is: 1 = Permanent, 9 = Temporary” and “Is the cause for the low grade something that you or other people: 1 = Can Control, 9 = Cannot Control.” In Russell’s (1982) study, the CDS produced three clear factors that corresponded with the different causal dimensions, correlated only .19 to .28, and were reliable (alpha coefficients ranged from .73 to .87). For our data set, however, reliability analysis of the controllability items produced an alpha of only 0.15 indicating an unreliable scale; hence, the controllability dimension was dropped from further analysis. Reliability analysis of the locus and stability factors yielded alpha = 0.84 and 0.69, respectively.

Face-Threatening Acts

Participants were asked to recall a conversation they had with their instructor about a grade that was lower than they desired. The participants wrote out this conversation
in turns (i.e., “I said . . .”, “The instructor said . . .”). Inspection of the data revealed that there were 213 usable “conversations” for this analysis.

Within each of these recalled conversations, all FTAs committed by the student were identified and unitized by the first author as well as by a separate coder who was masked to the research hypotheses. Because our hypotheses focus on FTAs and politeness strategies enacted by students, all text that the student recalled as being spoken by the instructor was not analyzed. To define the FTA unit, coders referred to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) list of FTAs under categories of threats to own negative or positive face as well as other’s negative or positive face. When any aspect of the student’s recalled statements fit into any of the listed types of FTAs, those aspects were highlighted and defined as a unit. Guetzkow’s $U$, an index of disagreement about the number of FTAs present across all the 213 recalled conversations, was low ($U = 0.03$), indicating that unitizing reliability was acceptable (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984).

Once unitized, each FTA was categorized as one of four categories described by Brown and Levinson (1987): threat to student’s positive face, threat to student’s negative face, threat to instructor’s positive face and threat to instructor’s negative face. (See Table 1 for examples of each category.) Cohen’s kappa for categorization of FTAs, based on independent coding of a random selection of 25% of the identified face threats, was acceptable at 0.79.

**Politeness Strategies**

Once each type of FTA had been identified, the type of politeness included with each FTA was labeled (i.e., whether each FTA performed bald on record, with positive politeness, etc.) by the same two coders who classified FTAs. Specifically, for each FTA, coders were instructed to identify, considering the context of the entire conversation, the main politeness strategy that the participant used to account for the FTA.

Politeness strategies were identified by category of politeness as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987): bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, or off record/hinting (Table 1). Because coders identified politeness strategies that were reported, the response “don’t do the FTA” was not included in this coding. The two coders independently classified the type of politeness strategy used with each of the same randomly selected 25% of the total FTAs that was used to classify type of FTA. Kappa for identification of politeness strategies was acceptable at 0.74. Discrepancies were discussed until the two coders came to consensus over each coded item for purposes of analysis.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics are presented for the sample’s scores on their attributions for the poor grade, primary goal during the conversation about the poor grade, and reported outcomes of the conversation. Regarding attributions, respondents scored: below the midpoint for locus ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.09$, scale = 1[internal]—9[external]);
and below the midpoint of the stability measure ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.08$, scale = 1[variable] — 9[stable]).

With respect to goals, approximately two-thirds (66%, $n = 155$) of participants were coded as having persuading as their primary goal during the recalled conversation about the negative grade. A much smaller percent indicated that impressing 12% ($n = 27$), learning 9% ($n = 22$), or fighting 8% ($n = 18$) was their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Examples of Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat to student’s positive face:</strong> expressing concern about their abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat to student’s negative face:</strong> agreeing to spend more time/effort studying in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat to instructor’s positive face:</strong> issuing challenges, complaints, criticism and disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat to instructor’s negative face:</strong> requesting help, suggesting or advising about teaching or grading practices, warning or threatening, or reminding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off-record strategy: indirect face threats, multiple intentions, hints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I was quite disappointed with the grade and I have been depressed lately because of that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It may be necessary to spend a lot more time than I have been on this class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It seems to me that there should be some sort of objective standard—a fixed grading system to make sure the grades are fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My grade is painfully close to a B —</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative politeness strategy: attending to autonomy (e.g., minimizing threat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I studied really hard for this, but I suppose I could try a different method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will try to clean up this paper <em>as much as possible</em> and get it back to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I was marked down <em>a little bit</em> too harshly on this problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there <em>any way</em> that you could look over my paper again?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive politeness strategy: attending to affirmation (e.g., giving reasons for face threat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am studying and failing <em>because</em> I am having trouble grasping the readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This class is really important to me, and I plan on working hard to get better grades than this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel as though my project was an adequate response to the assignment <em>because</em> I thought the goal was to take a simple mode model and animate it effectively and simply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was just wondering what I was missing, just <em>so next time</em> I can study more effectively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bald on record strategy: no attention to face saving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t study the correct material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK, I will be in contact with you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were never explicitly clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show me the statistics and the key for the final exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

194  C. M. Sabee & S. R. Wilson
primary goal. Together the goal categories of persuading, learning, and fighting accounted for 83% of participants’ responses, which is consistent with Hypothesis 1. With regard to RQ1, the primary goal category of “impressing” emerged during the coding process, and adding this fourth primary goal category created a system that accounted for 95% of participants’ responses.

Reported outcomes of these students’ conversations varied. In answer to “what was the outcome of your conversation (e.g., did your grade change, did you learn anything new, were things made clearer to you)?” the most common outcome mentioned pertained to the student’s ultimate grade on the assignment (202 out of 234 participants). For the 202 students who mentioned their grade, 41% \((n = 83)\) indicated that their grades changed, while 59% \((n = 119)\) indicated that their grades stayed the same. Slightly more than half \((n = 61)\) of participants whose grade was not changed stated that they were upset or frustrated with the outcome.

The remaining 14% \((n = 32)\) of the sample did not spontaneously mention their grade in response to the open-ended question. More than half of this latter group \((n = 20)\) indicated that they had learned more about the material or study habits from the conversation. The remainder either did not have an outcome (i.e., they were currently having an ongoing conversation about grades) or the outcome was not clear. Mean satisfaction for the sample as a whole was just above the midpoint \((M = 3.05, SD = 1.53, on a 1–5 scale)\), but the standard deviation was 1.53. This large range of scores may reflect that many students received changed grades, but many others did not and hence were frustrated.

**Attributions and Interaction Goals**

Hypothesis 2 predicted that students’ recalled primary goals would be associated with the attributions they made for their disappointing grade along the locus and stability dimensions (while this hypothesis originally included controllability as well, poor measurement reliability precluded analysis of that variable). While three goals were originally hypothesized, four goals emerged from the open-ended data, so we used the four emergent goals for this analysis. Assuming \(\alpha = .05\) and \(n = 222\), power to detect a medium-size effect for type of primary goal was 0.85 (Cohen, 1977). Given that the two dependent variables (i.e., strength of locus and stability attributions) were not strongly related \((r = .05)\), separate one-way ANOVAs were performed on each, with primary goals (at four levels) as the independent variable.

Testing strength of the locus dimension, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant goal type effect, \(F(3,218) = 3.853, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.051\). A follow-up Scheffe test indicated that participants who reported learning as their primary goal had higher internality ratings \((M = 4.6, SD = .44)\) than did those who reported fighting goals \((M = 6.78, SD = .49)\), whereas those who reported persuading \((M = 5.75, SD = .17)\) and impressing \((M = 5.46, SD = .40)\) goals fell in the middle and did not differ significantly from the extreme two groups.
For the stability dimension, the one-way ANOVA once again revealed a significant goal type effect, $F(3,212) = 3.27, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.05$. A follow-up Scheffe test, however, did not indicate any significant mean differences among the primary goals for stability attributions.

**Primary Goals and FTAs**

Hypothesis 3 predicted that participants with different primary goals would report different types of FTAs, whereas Hypothesis 4 predicted that participants whose primary goal was fighting would report a larger number of FTAs compared to those with other types of primary goals. Overall, participants reported an average of 2.49 FTAs per conversation.

There were four primary goal categories (learning, persuading, fighting and impressing) and four categories of FTA types (threat to instructor’s negative face, threat to instructor’s positive face, threat to student’s own negative face, and threat to student’s own positive face). Chi-square comparisons, run to test H3, indicated a significant association between students’ primary goals and the category of FTA that they used $\chi^2 (9, n = 530) = 38.94, p < .01$, Cramer’s $V = 0.16$ (see Table 2 for cell counts). Consistent with H3, the distribution of FTAs across the four categories varied depending on the primary goal.

To further investigate the association between FTAs and primary goals, chi-square tests for one independent sample were run comparing frequency of occurrence for types of FTAs separately within each goal category, and residuals were inspected. Thus, observed cell counts of FTAs for each primary goal (i.e., each column in Table 2) were tested against the expectation that cell counts in each category would be equal (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). For the learning goal, $\chi^2 (3, n = 40) = 32.6, p < .01$, threats to the instructor’s negative face were performed more often than expected by chance, and threats to student’s own positive face were done less often. For the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of FTA</th>
<th>Primary goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor’s positive face</td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor’s negative face</td>
<td>25 (63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s negative face</td>
<td>8 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s positive face</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 530 FTAs. %: percentage of total FTAs within each goal type (i.e., column percentage).*
persuading goal, $\chi^2 (3, n=379) = 133.71, p < .01$, students were more likely to perform FTAs to the instructor’s positive and negative face and less likely to perform FTAs to their own negative or positive face than was expected by chance. For the fighting goal, $\chi^2 (2, n=54) = 22.33, p < .01$, threats to the instructor’s positive face were much more likely to be performed than any other threat. Interestingly, there were no threats to own positive face performed by any participant who had a fighting goal, and hence the chi-square test had to be conducted without this type of face threat since the cell had a zero count. Finally, there was no significant difference between types of FTAs performed within the impressing goal, $\chi^2 (3, n=57) = 5.81, p > .05$.

To assess Hypothesis 4, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with type of primary goal as the independent variable and mean number of FTAs as the dependent variable. The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect for goal type, $F(3,209) = 3.46, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .047$. A post hoc Scheffe test revealed that, as predicted, participants with fighting goals ($M=3.38, SD=.326$) on average performed significantly more FTAs than did those with learning goals ($M=2.00, SD=.292$). Participants with persuading ($M=2.48, SD=.105$) and impressing goals ($M=2.38, SD=.266$) fell in the middle and did not differ significantly from the other two groups.

**Primary Goals and Politeness Strategies**

Hypothesis 5 predicted that participants with different primary goals would employ different politeness strategies, whereas Hypothesis 6 predicted that participants whose primary goal was fighting on average would use less polite strategies compared to participants with other primary goals. To assess Hypothesis 5, a $4 \times 4$ chi-square analysis was conducted to test for significant differences in strategy use across primary goal categories (see Table 3). The chi-square analysis demonstrated a significant relationship between primary goal categories and politeness strategies, $\chi^2 (9, n=529) = 26.95, p < .01$, Cramer’s $V = .13$.

To further investigate the association between politeness strategies and primary goals, chi-square tests for one independent sample were run comparing frequency of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Observed Frequencies for Politeness Strategies and Primary Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of FTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative politeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive politeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bald on record</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 529 politeness strategies. %: percentage of all strategies within each goal type (column percentage).
occurrence for politeness strategies separately within each goal category, and residuals were inspected (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). For the learning goal, \( \chi^2 (3, n=40) = 32.40, p < .01 \), residuals indicated that negative politeness strategies were used significantly more often than expected due to chance. In addition, hinting strategies were used significantly less often than expected due to chance (see Table 3). For the persuading goal, \( \chi^2 (3, n=379) = 140.08, p < .01 \), positive and negative politeness strategies were used much more often than expected due to chance, and hinting and bald-on-record strategies were used less often than expected due to chance. For fighting goals, \( \chi^2 (3, n=53) = 12.43, p < .01 \), hinting type politeness strategies were used less often than expected, while bald-on-record strategies were used with similar frequency to positive and negative strategies. Finally, for the impressing goal, \( \chi^2 (3, n=57) = 22.23, p < .01 \), negative politeness strategies were used more often and hinting strategies less often than expected by chance. In sum, hinting was used less often than would be expected by chance across all four primary goals, but use of the other three politeness strategies varied depending on goal type.

Hypothesis 6, which predicted that participants with fighting goals on average would use the lowest-level politeness strategies, was assessed by running a one-way ANOVA test with type of primary goal (at four levels) as the independent variable and mean differences of politeness strategies as the dependent variable. For this analysis, we operated under the assumption that politeness strategies are rank ordered (Brown & Levinson, 1987) such that bald on record is the least polite strategy (1), positive politeness is the next most polite strategy (2), negative politeness is the next most polite strategy (3), and finally hinting or off-record is the most polite strategy (4) (other than not doing the FTA at all). For each participant, a mean politeness score was calculated by summing the ranks for all of that participant’s politeness strategies and dividing by the number of politeness strategies that the participant performed during the conversation (a higher mean score indicates a more polite overall interaction). The ANOVA revealed a significant mean difference, \( F(3,207) = 3.591, p < .05, \eta^2 = .049 \). Post hoc Scheffe tests revealed, however, that the participants whose primary goal was persuading (\( M = 2.15, SD = .04 \)) actually used significantly lower-level politeness strategies than those whose goal was learning (\( M = 2.60, SD = .12 \)). Those with fighting (\( M = 2.25, SD = .11 \)) and impressing (\( M = 2.33, SD = .10 \)) goals fell in the middle and did not differ significantly from the other two groups. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was not supported, but the findings suggest that participants with learning goals were significantly more polite than those with persuading goals.

Discussion

This study had two major objectives. First, we wanted to fill a gap in existing research by investigating student–teacher interactions about disappointing grades, including what motivates students to undertake such conversations as well as what students say during them. Second, we wanted to expand the primary goal framework by relating attribution and politeness theories to the framework. We discuss primary goals in the
context of conversations about disappointing grades, how attributions, face-threatening acts and politeness strategies relate to such goals, and limitations and implications of our study.

Primary Goals in the Context of Disappointing Grades

One motivation for this project was to understand the types of primary goals that students have when discussing disappointing grades with their instructors. It is clear that respondents in our study were very grade-conscious. Approximately two-thirds (66%) were classified as having “persuading the instructor to change the grade” as their primary goal. Most respondents (86%), when recalling a discussion about a low grade, described the outcome of their interaction in terms of whether or not their grade was changed. These findings suggest that conversations about disappointing grades are both common and challenging for many college instructors.

Our results also advance theoretical understanding of primary goals because they illustrate how different individuals, entering into the “same” type of conversation, may not perceive the conversation as having the same purpose. Rather, participants framed interactions about disappointing grades in different ways. The emergence of the “impressing” goal category also shows the importance of defining primary goals in terms of directional force rather than content or importance. Although “identity” goals have been classified in other studies as secondary goals, or conversational constraints, rather than as primary goals (e.g., Dillard et al., 1989; Kellermann, 1992), in our study the goal of “impressing” actually was seen by some students as the purpose that for the moment framed the interaction and motivated them to approach their professor. Prior typologies of primary goals, such as influence goals in close relationships (Cody et al., 1994) or at work (Yukl et al., 1995), would not have captured these latter participants’ goal descriptions.

Some might argue that all participants in our study had the overarching goal of getting their grade changed, because we asked about a “disappointing grade.” According to this reasoning, participants who were classified in other goal categories (learning, fighting, impressing) simply had different subgoals or were using different strategies to pursue a grade change. However, it seems unlikely to us that students classified as having learning goals thought that the best way to get their grade changed was not to ask for a grade change at all, or that students with fighting goals thought that insulting their instructor would get their grade changed. Our contention is that students whom we classified as having other primary goals framed their conversation about the disappointing grade in qualitatively different ways and hence had different approach motivations for talking with their instructors.

Associations with Primary Goals

Our results suggest that the specific primary goal students have when talking with their instructor is associated with their attributions for the disappointing grade. Students with learning versus fighting goals differed largely on the locus dimension,
in that students with learning goals were most likely to view the cause for the disappointing grade as residing largely within themselves, whereas students with fighting goals were least likely to do so. Although the association between attributions and primary goals replicates experimental research conducted in other contexts (e.g., MacGeorge, 2001), it is important to acknowledge that a causal relationship cannot be established from our findings. Future research might employ diaries or interviews to investigate the changing nature of both attributions and primary goals within conversations over time.

Students with different primary goals also differed in what they said during the interaction with their instructor. Although prior research on primary/secondary goals and message production often has assessed message qualities in very broad strokes such as the overall degree of approval or pressure in an influence message (Dillard et al., 1989; Wilson et al., 1998), our study documents how primary goals are related to the use of specific forms of FTAs and politeness strategies. For example, participants whose primary goal was impressing were the only group who threatened their own face almost as frequently as the instructor’s face (see Table 2), and participants whose primary goal was learning were the only group who eschewed the use of bald-on-record strategies almost entirely (see Table 3). Although confidence in these conclusions is limited by our reliance on recalled data, the findings suggest that how participants frame interactions in terms of primary goals has implications for very concrete features of the messages they produce.

Our findings illustrate the value of analyzing both FTAs and politeness strategies. For example, we predicted that students with fighting goals would be less polite than students with learning or persuading goals. The actual results, however, are not so simple. As expected, students with fighting goals attacked the instructor’s positive face more frequently than students with other primary goals (see Table 2), but they did not use lower levels of politeness than the other groups. Students with persuading goals actually were significantly less polite than those with learning goals, whereas students with fighting and impressing goals had mean politeness scores falling between their learning and persuading counterparts. Although they wanted to attack their instructors’ face, students with fighting goals also may not have wanted to totally sever their relationship with their instructor. As such, they may have used politeness strategies as a means of balancing their competing desires to attack and support face. Our conclusions here are based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) assumption that superordinate strategies can be rank-ordered in terms of relative politeness across contexts, an assumption that others have challenged (see Wilson, 2002). Despite this, the findings highlight the importance of considering both the number and type of FTAs students perform, as well as the manner in which they are performed.

Relative to earlier work, this study provides a more complete understanding of each primary goal type because of its focus on both attributions and face/politeness concerns. Consider students with learning goals. These students directed the majority of their FTA towards their instructor’s negative face (see Table 2) using both positive and negative politeness (but not bald on record) strategies (see Table 3). In contrast,
students with other primary goals were more likely than those with learning goals to
direct a substantial percentage of their FTAs toward their instructor’s positive as well
as negative face using bald on record as well as negative and positive politeness
strategies. Students with learning goals, who tended to make internal attributions
about their negative grade, may have believed that their future performance would
benefit as long as they adopted different strategies for better understanding the
material (e.g., going to office hours, showing their study materials to the instructor
before the next exam), and hence they needed their instructor’s help to implement
these strategies (Curtis, 1992). On the other hand, students with different primary
goals, who tended to make more external attributions about their negative grade,
made threats to their teacher’s positive as well as negative face by challenging,
criticizing, or giving advice. These students may not have believed that adopting
different strategies would lead to improved performance in the future.

Limitations and Implications

By coding open-ended responses to recalled interactions, we tested our anticipated
goal typology with a sizeable sample and revealed an unanticipated goal type. Despite
these strengths, the method still presents an overly static view of primary goals.
Primary goals describe what a student, for the moment, believes is “going on” during
a conversation with an instructor, and the students may have had different
understandings of what was going on at different points in the conversation.
Videotaping student–teacher interactions about disappointing grades and conduct-
ing stimulated recall interviews with students immediately afterwards might
illuminate shifts in primary goals. Aside from relying on recalled conversations,
our study is also limited in that we only analyzed the perspective of one participant in
the interaction. A better understanding of conversations about disappointing grades
would come from investigating the perspectives of teachers as well as students.

The primary goal framework suggests a number of communication competencies
that may help teachers navigate discussions with students about disappointing grades,
including: (a) identifying various ways in which students frame such interactions,
(b) recognizing indicators (e.g., FTAs, communicated attributions) that a student has
adopted a particular frame, (c) explaining their own views of what is—or should
be—the primary interaction goal, and (d) encouraging a student in some cases to
reframe the understood goal of the interaction in a way that does not undermine the
student’s motivation to learn or either party’s face needs (Wilson & Sabee, 2003).

More concretely, results of this study may inform teacher-training initiatives.
Previous research has suggested many ways teachers can attempt to avoid grade
conflicts by communicating their grade rubrics to their students clearly, or having
students participate in the grading process (e.g., Svinicki, 1998). However, student
disappointment and conflict about grades cannot always be avoided. There were few
students in this sample who had never had a conflict about grades. If students are
pursuing a goal such as “get my grade changed,” instructors may find themselves in
an uncomfortable situation. Many instructors have a policy of not changing grades
except in cases of clerical errors (e.g., not adding up the total points earned by a student correctly). Given the inevitability of conversations about disappointing grades, instructors may benefit from practice at diagnosing and negotiating primary goals with students. Upon realizing that a student appears to be pursuing a persuading goal, a teacher might diffuse a grade conflict by: (a) justifying why the grade earned on the current assignment cannot be changed, but also (b) explaining how mistakes made were caused by factors that the student can correct on future assignments if the student adopts new learning strategies. Although this may not change the student’s desire for a grade change, it may leave the student feeling less frustrated and more willing to focus on mastering course material in the future. In our view, the primary goal framework offers theoretical insights about message production in instructional contexts as well as practical insights that can help inform teacher-training initiatives.

References


Appendix: Definitions and Examples of Four Primary Goals

Learning Goals
The student wishes to better learn the material on which s/he received a disappointing grade. For instance the student may want to discuss study habits, go over test problems to correct misunderstanding, or discuss strategies for improving skills. For this goal, the student’s main concern centers on bettering his/her own understanding of the material.

Examples: “to figure out what I was doing wrong and get any hints or tips for the future,” “to make sure that I understood the material,” “get answers and explanations about the questions on the midterm—ask for better study habits”

Persuading Goals
The student wishes to change his/her performance evaluation for the better. For instance, the student may want to get his/her grade changed, to have the grading scheme applied differently, or to be given the chance to redo work for a new grade. For this goal, the student’s main concern centers on the actual performance outcome.

Examples: “try and get my grade changed,” “to get more credit,” “get to re-write my paper”

Fighting Goals
The student wishes to vent anger or frustration over receiving a lower than expected grade. For instance, the student may want to prove that the instructor was being unfair or that their test questions or graded assignments were faulty. With this goal, the student’s main objective is to vindicate or justify his/her anger about the grade.

Examples: “belittle teacher,” “[show] that her method of teaching is archaic and counter-productive”

Impressing Goals
The student wishes to impress upon the instructor a positive self-image or to repair her/his image in the eyes of the instructor. For instance, the student may want to assure the instructor that s/he typically does not perform so poorly or that s/he is a very dedicated student who wishes to do well in the class. For this goal, the student’s main concern is that his/her own image is positive in the eyes of the instructor.

Examples: “wanted to show that I was putting forth an effort,” “to show that I am a good student” “I wanted the professor to know that I haven’t been slacking and that I work very hard inside and outside of class.”

Received: August 28, 2004
Accepted: April 19, 2005