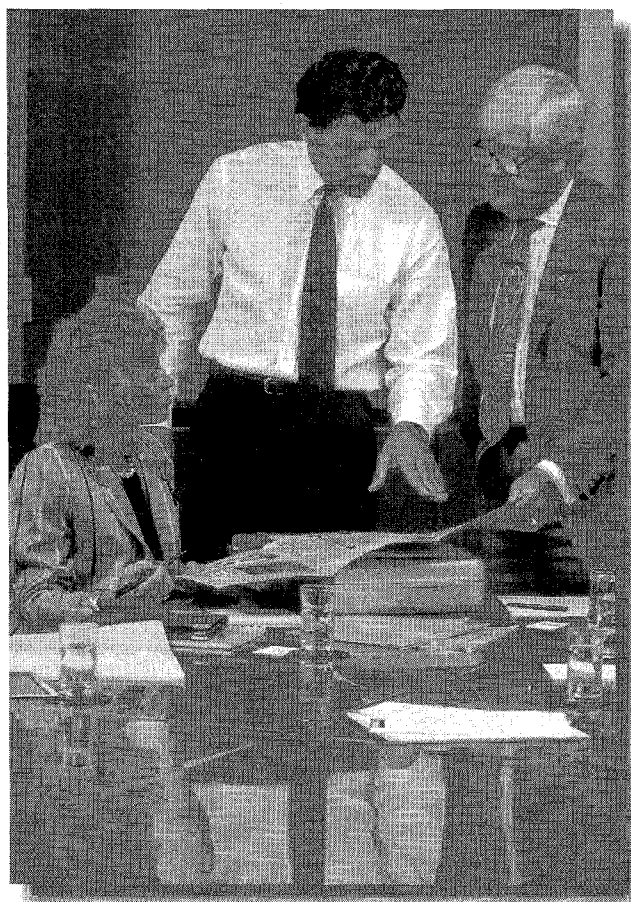


Negotiating Expert Status: Who Gets Taken Seriously

A lay person may listen puzzled as a specialist in a public hearing discusses a technical point. Similarly, a challenging question from a technically knowledgeable member of the audience may be difficult to fathom. Failure to understand what a speaker discusses — despite one's interest in a topic — can cause frustration, anger, and despair. It makes a listener wonder why they are there trying to engage, and why technical specialists persist in such a style of presentation.

Breakdowns in communication between technical and nontechnical people are linked to the concept of "expert." This link involves the process of the "negotiation of expert status." The phrase, "the negotiation of expert status," refers to the social construction of the role of "expert" by participants in a conversation. The term "negotiation" refers to the sometimes subtle and sometimes overtly contentious nature of a debate about who deserves to be listened to as a voice of authority on a particular topic [1]-[9].



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Perspectives on Experts, Expertise, and Status

There are a variety of approaches to the issue of perceiving expertise. One body of literature focuses on the use of experts and expert knowledge as tools in social struggles, for example to legitimize plans or to challenge other experts [10], [11]. Such analyses treat recognized experts as a given since their focus is on the uses of experts rather than the social processes by which the status of "expert" is created and negotiated.

Many experts perceive themselves as neutral and claim that their knowledge is a direct reflection of nature. This perception has come under attack by constructivists who have analyzed the deep-seated role of social factors in scientific facts and theories [12]-[15].

On a less theoretical level, many studies have been made of the actual uses of specialists and their expertise in struggles over nuclear waste, pesticides, and numerous other issues [16], [17]. These studies show that in controversial issues the ostensible neutrality of experts may not survive: scientific claims can be challenged by partisan experts [18], the wrong expertise may be brought to bear [19], [20], or experts may be servants of power [21] or self-serving elites [22], [23]. It has also been argued that esoteric knowledge is not necessary for members of the public to become involved in decision making about technology [24], [25]. There are a number of experiments showing the capacity of groups of citizens to make informed judgments about technology [26], [27].

Of this varied literature, a portion deals with the processes by which experts achieve their status as experts. Most relevant here is the study of "boundary work," namely the various techniques and activities used by groups to separate themselves from others. The boundary between professional scientists and the lay public does not occur automatically: scientists have long had to work hard to separate themselves from non-scientists using techniques such as credentials, jargon, control over journals, control over training of new recruits, and an array of rhetorical strategies [28]-[31]. Scientists work to establish boundaries between themselves and the public, between different scientific disciplines, and between science and "pseudo-science" [32], among others. This analysis of boundary work shows that the attribution of expertise to someone does not automatically flow from what they know but depends on social processes of persuasion and contestation.

Discourse analysis has promise for elucidating the dynamics of face-to-face boundary work, namely the things that scientists write and say [33]. It has demonstrable practical

value for understanding the interplay of discourse and appearances of expertise [34]. There is also a more fine-grained type of boundary work that occurs daily in routine encounters between experts and others, involving lin-

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guistic and behavioral cues that establish or undermine claims to — or assumptions about — expertise. It is this type of face-to-face boundary work that is addressed here.

Expert Status Defined

Expert status represents a measure of authority over a conversation. Expert status refers to a concept very different from that of the status of experts, such as engineers, in society. One might say, using engineering parlance, that the system boundaries for the two concepts are different. The status of experts in society has society as the relevant system. Expert status, the focus of this article, has the conversation as the relevant system.

When we decide to grant expert status in a conversation, we tend to rationalize that we defer due to the "expert's" relevant knowledge, skill, and experience. These judgements we base on evidence. We see something in the "performance" that a speaker gives in a conversation that lends that speaker an air of authority. As relatively nontechnical listeners, we can rarely gauge with certainty whether the "expert" has the insight claimed. We cannot act as an instructor might and use our superior knowledge as the basis for testing the ability to achieve a desired outcome — a lightweight component, a fast and

efficient circuit, or an effective plan to clean up hazardous waste. In many instances, when "experts" compete, only time can reveal which "expert" has pointed to the most desirable choice. As a result, during a conversation, expert *ability* is hard to judge conclusively. Yet, even when we, relative nonexperts, fathom only a fraction of what the "expert" says, we do make such judgements of ability. We seem to rely on prior knowledge, on expectations, and on cues to make such decisions.

At the moment of interaction, the candidate for expert status must be able to evince recog-

As noted above, being granted the privilege of expert status in a conversation is different from — though connected to — the status of the expert/professional in society. Expert status is "local." It is a provisional status in that it represents the authority granted by a particular listener in a particular conversation. Thus, expert status is defined as being in the eye of the beholder. It is "negotiated," meaning that it is a provisional and potentially changeable status resulting from confrontation, accommodations, implicit agreements, and a range of other processes of face-to-face interaction.

There is a type of boundary work that occurs daily in routine encounters between experts and others, involving linguistic and behavioral cues.

nizable cues, the cues to which the listener, or "client," will respond, such as appropriate technical language. The nonexpert interprets — or misinterprets — such cues and responds to the question, "How well does this person fit my model of the kind of person whom I would like to view as an expert in this situation?" The nonexpert gauges expert ability by a process of reading socially recognized indicators not only of that ability but of its relevance, too. The gauging of adequate expert ability alone is commonly recognized as "credibility." The gauging of the relevance of that ability is a different dimension altogether, as scholars of the development of expert systems recognize [35]. This evaluation of credibility and relevance as perceived within a conversation by a particular observer leads to an assignment — or nonassignment — of expert status for that conversation.

The concept of expert status derives from Goffman's concept of participation status. Goffman [36, p. 3] states, "When a word is spoken, all those who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it." Expert status connotes a high participation status, the ability to contribute to a conversation and be heeded.

Why Expert Status is a "Negotiated Status"

The concept of a negotiated status has roots in social anthropology [37], [38]. Mitchell [39] argues that the assignment of a negotiated status by others whom one meets hinges on one's public, social identity as opposed to one's private, personal identity. Mitchell found that status categorizations are particularly important in interactions between members of different ethnic groups. In such insider-outsider interactions (that is, I am inside my group, but you are outside), the social identity tells others whether they see friend or foe. Social identity also helps an observer to distinguish whether the "other" is from a group higher or lower in status and deserves deference or contempt.

Consider an example of how the concepts of social identity and negotiated status apply to "experts" in the environmental arena. Jane Smith, Ph.D., identifies herself as a specialist in hydrogeology working as a consultant for a chemical company. Her specialty and her alignment with the chemical company contribute to Dr. Smith's social identity. However, not everyone whom she encounters will grant her expert status. With her social identity, Dr. Smith will probably be viewed as a voice of authority by her clients at the chemical company. Dr. Smith will probably not be viewed as a voice of authority by members of an environmental group concerned with pollution caused by the company. Dr. Smith's expert status is a negotiated status in that she would gain expert status from one audience — company executives — but not from another audience — environmental group representatives. She would be given an opportunity to speak at length and would probably be heeded by chemical company executives. She would probably not earn the same privileges — at least not so readily — in conversations with members of the environmental group. The latter group might recognize her technical skill but still not trust her advice. Though her social identity could be clear to both groups, the authority that she wields with each is different. In particular, her

participation status in conversations that others see as relevant to her specialty — the measure of expert status that she gains with each group — will differ. In addition, she will probably not be granted expert status by either group in conversations about finance, local politics, or other issues not relevant to her specialty. Individuals decide how to respond by listening to a person speak and looking for signals indicating to which group the speaker belongs.

Strathern [37] found that even when signals of identity are clear to someone from a particular group, the person being evaluated may be included or excluded from that group depending on the nature of the question involved. By analogy, one could see that for a nightly dinner, only parents and children would constitute family members (hence, the term “immediate family”). For a wedding, the definition of “family member” would be much broader. Thus, an individual’s expert authority within a conversation can be seen to fluctuate depending on the nature of the question involved — the relevance issue — as understood by the particular audience at that moment.

In sum, the relative authority in a conversation — participation status — that one person might grant to another depends on a set of perceptions of identity and context. Who is the perceiver or listener? What is that person’s understanding of the question involved? To what social group does the individual being judged appear to belong? How is that group perceived in the context of the listener’s experiences and understanding of the situation? Different listeners will get different answers to these and other such questions, and these answers will change during a conversation. Thus, a measure of authority in a conversation can be seen to be not preordained but negotiated, as resulting from an iterative and interactive process.

Why Conversations Contain Status Negotiations

Attempts to understand content and to evaluate the identity of a speaker in a conversation are known in the subfield of linguistics called pragmatics as the joint negotiation of meaning and identity [40]. In the discussion of technical matters, this concurrent negotiation of meaning and identity means that participants attempt to understand one another and to negotiate about expert status.

The importance not just of meaning but of rank in a conversation — such as the rank of “expert” — derives from an emphasis in the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and conversation analysis on the relationship aspects of communication. Linde [41] cites “referential

and relational components of any utterance.” Lyons [42] uses, respectively, the terms “descriptive” and “interpersonal” aspects. Bateson [43] also refers to such distinctions. Speech-act theory, which is usually traced to Austin [44], has this relational component as a primary element. The linguist Tannen [45, p. A9] claims that “[There is a] misconception about language, that language is to communicate ideas in the most efficient way. It’s not. Language is to negotiate social relationships, and the meanings of the words are quite minor in that whole thing.” More pointedly, conversations can be used to play out power relationships [46]–[48].

Downey [4], an anthropologist who studies engineers, notes that the influence of the perceived “knower” can derive from our hunger for information. Individuals in organizations see information as having symbolic and practical power [7], [49]. So, individuals who are hungry for informed decision making can be seen as primed for negotiations of expert status, i.e., they need to find, or anoint, “experts.” One who gives the appearance in a conversation of the ability to supply information becomes able to secure influential relationships, such as the relationship of “expert” to client. Someone deemed an “expert” can exert influence over the present conduct of the conversation itself, and can use that privilege to affect the relationship with — and future actions of — the client. The following example illustrates a portion of this process in a “microscopic” episode in a public hearing.

Who Gets Listened to by the Water Board

The episode analyzed here occurs midway through the hearing of what will be called “the ABS case,” an illustration selected from 100 such cases analyzed fully elsewhere [2]. ABS is a company that owns a hazardous waste site that has been leaking chemicals from waste ponds. ABS has agreed to clean up the site, but there has been disagreement about the cleanup schedule between ABS’s cleanup specialists and the technical staff for “the Water Board,” a regional arm of a State body that enforces water pollution laws. Because of this disagreement, the technical staff and the “discharger’s” (ABS’s) representatives present their sides of the argument to the Water Board, a panel of nine citizens who are appointed by the State governor and who meet monthly to hear such “contested” cases. As usual in these publicly contested cases, the Water Board’s technical staff testified first and presented its interpretation of the situation. Following the staff presentation but before the ABS representatives spoke, Board members Lowery and Samuels asked questions (all names here are

fictionalized). Lowery, a biochemist, is one of the more "technical" Board members. He requested clarification about the chemicals detected leaking from the site. Samuels, who often acted as the lead Board member on policy issues, asked for a review of details of state policy about the areas or types of groundwater that must be protected.

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ABS's lawyer and its director of environmental programming then presented their arguments, without interruption. Lawyer Kennedy went first and groundwater specialist Mcleod went second. ABS's representatives argued that whatever was leaking from their ponds had not gone far. They added that there is no evidence that it will go far very fast, and that even if it did move far, it would not even come close to present or future sources of drinking water.

As shown in the conversation excerpted in the sidebar, after ABS's arguments, there is an apparent negotiation of expert status. Board member Lowery exercises his prerogative to question and opens an interchange with the technical specialist for ABS, Mcleod. At one point, Board member Versales (another one of the "technical" Board members) inserts a question. As Mcleod responds to the questions, staff members Groves and Wilson break in, which, in the context of observation of one-hundred such contested cases and interviews with staff members, appears to symbolize the effort of the staff to maintain its close relationship with the Board.

One interpretation of what is occurring here is that these testifiers are competing to present a view of the physical world that the Water Board will accept. This interpretation suggests that Board members decide simultaneously which view to accept and to whom to grant authority to

delineate that view. That is, Water Board members in the end believe the staff's view of the ABS site because they decide to heed the staff. The staff's view is compatible with Board members' understandings of groundwater, and the Board decides once again — as in ninety-nine out of one-hundred contested cases witnessed — to grant the staff an edge in expert status over other specialists.

Some may argue that it is also possible that testifiers are not merely performing for the audience present but also to establish a legally sound written record that is "rationally reconstructable" (rational in retrospect) [3].

However, it can also be argued that negotiations of expert status occur within the written record. Participants' concerns for the written record may diminish, but not destroy, the importance of interpersonal dynamics in the hearing room.

The negotiation of expert status involving Board members and various technical specialists is evident in the dialogue between them when analyzed in terms of the technical language used, the types of questions that Board members ask, and in who responds to those questions (See Sidebar).

Technical language in the excerpted passage can be understood to play a role in the negotiation of expert status. Take, for example, Mcleod's second sentence in his first turn to speak — "Groundwater, in general, follows the topography in this hydrogeological regime." This sentence says, in overly simple terms, "Around here, groundwater flows downhill." Mcleod uses a number of what linguists call "marked terms." A marked term is one that has a special meaning to a particular group of people. Marked terms are what lay people refer to as technical language and jargon. Marked terms in Mcleod's second sentence are: "follows"; "topography"; and "hydrogeological regime."

This technical terminology in Mcleod's phrasing can have the function of maintaining a public, ritualized interaction. The technical language signals a performance appropriate to the status that Mcleod seems to desire and that his observers expect in this setting. He says "right-sounding" words. Second, this technical language distinguishes Mcleod from other potential testifiers due to a "nontechnical" person's difficulty in comprehending and using such terms. That is, the "nontechnical" person has less skill with the language, such as facility in saying the word "hydrogeological". Third, Mcleod can be understood to recognize that, for ritual use, technical language must be alien within bounds. It must be recognizable jargon; and here, the phrase "hydrogeological regime" is fairly common, recognizable jargon for Board members.

Excerpt from Water Beard Hearing

Chairman Anderson: "Are there any questions?"

Board Member Lowery: "Could we have the slide, the one with the locations of the wells in the surrounding area, just for reference?"

ABS specialist Mcleod: "May I go point out which area it really is, the half-mile downgradient?"

Groundwater, in general, follows the topography in this hydrogeological regime. The surface impoundments, as you may recall, were the 1, 1A, 2 groups here, the OPQ group is up in this area, and the closed 12 through 16 ponds where the waste and liquids have been removed are in this area.

The central water regime of the site follows this general pattern, and the area that's downgradient of that regime, which would, in fact — the half-mile should be measured from the furthest downgradient pond, which is located right here—would follow this drainageway, since there are highlands on both sides and the water would converge in this valley.

So, basically, the half-mile would be apportioned out this way, and for the OPQ ponds, apportioned out this way. And it should be pointed out, that in the proposed modernization report, all the waste management units and surface impoundments would be within that central area.

So we're basically talking, for the future case, anyway, of the small area that extends out this way. This area here is clearly much higher topographically and the groundwater table's much higher than anywhere else on the site."

Board member Lowery: "So there would be about four wells that are downgradient, three or four wells, on the right?"

ABS specialist Mcleod: "That's right."

Lowery: "And they would be comparable to your monitoring well down at the bottom, as far as distance?"

Mcleod: "You mean this other well?"

Lowery: "Is that a monitoring well?"

Mcleod: "It's not a monitoring well, it's an abandoned well that was used for a cattle ranch there. This well is also owned by us."

Lowery: "So where were you collecting data from as to plumes and this sort of thing?"

Mcleod: "That's all up well within the site boundary here."

Lowery: "It's not within the half-mile? You haven't done any plume work outside the site?"

Mcleod: "No, there are no plumes outside the site."

Staff member Groves: "The one in orange is designated as NW-20, it's used as a background well by the site."

Mcleod: "I'm sorry, I thought you were referring to that—"

Staff member Groves: "Yeah, there's an abandoned well down there, too. The data I'm referring to in my staff report is NW-20."

Board member Lowery: "Where is that located?"

Mcleod: "This one?"

Groves: "There are a couple of monitoring wells, 14 and 25, within the half-mile but beyond the site boundary in that same valley."

Lowery: "And there's data available?"

Groves: "Yeah, those are wells when I was referring to higher levels of chlorides than natural, it was from those two wells."

Lowery: "Where are they located compared to the other one?"

Staff member Wilson: "They're located immediately downstream of the dam."

Lowery: "They're in line with the yellow line?"

Staff member Wilson: "Yes."

Board member Versales: "What sort of depths are we talking about?"

Chairman Lockhart: (to Lowery) "Are you through asking questions?"

Board member Lowery: "Yeah."

Chairman Lockhart: (to Versales) "Go ahead."

Versales: "For clarification, I wondered what kind of depths these monitoring wells were?"

Staff member Wilson: "There are two wells that are downstream of this dam and we're talking one that is shallow and the other 30, 35 feet, and one that is deeper."

Board member Lowery: "What are the depths of all the wells around?"

Staff member Groves: "Most of the supply wells are shallow, that being probably less than 40 feet. They're tapping the shallow alluvium, the shallow groundwater in that area. NW-20, the one I was referring to there at the bottom in the orange, is also a shallow well, 20, 30 feet in my memory, it's shallow. The abandoned well there is, I think, about 300 feet deep, if I remember right."

Lowery: "Does the hydrogeologic data then show that the original flow of that water from within a half-mile of the site, for instance?"

Groves: "Yes, there's shallow alluvium, which contains groundwater, and there's groundwater flowing through there and that alluvium goes back up into that half-mile area. Three shallow monitoring wells in that valley — or the two shallow ones are monitoring the same groundwater, that's our opinion."

Lowery: "Isn't your case that the data from these monitoring wells isn't available yet or is it?"

Groves: "Yes, it's available."

ABS specialist Mcleod: "There are routine analyses available, yes."

Lowery: "And what is it showing?"

Groves: "It's showing — near the site, we're finding slightly elevated levels of chloride, and as you get down outside the half-mile zone, you're finding essentially natural conditions within the natural variations in that area, but it's natural and it's drinkable water, no impacts."

Fourth, demonstrated differences in ability with technical language can be seen to represent a display of differences in skill. Sometimes, there is no opportunity for analytical abilities to be demonstrated, but linguistic abilities can be. This display resembles throwing a spear into a target — linguistic ability — to represent skill in hunting — analytical ability. In both displays of skill, the ability signals a status difference. The

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person who cannot display the ability symbolically is restricted to lower status than the person who can symbolically display the ability. Fifth, form protects substance in the ritual oratory of the hearing, a point that extends the first point above about ritual form. Ritual form can have both a symbolic and an instrumental function. Something said by Mcleod in the proper form at the proper time is harder to refute than is a statement in less appropriate form, as analysis [1] revealed about testimony before the Water Board of citizen activists.

These points indicate that technical language that might be hard for some to fathom or to use themselves becomes necessary because the hearing represents a contest of skill. Specialists can be understood to vie for an edge in expert status not simply by displaying the analytical abilities that they claim to have exercised in formulating their arguments. They display the rhetorical and linguistic skills understood to stand for those abilities. This dynamic means, at least in part, that the staff needs to rebuff a symbolic challenge to its skills to convince the Board to accept the substance of its arguments. A subtle challenge and rebuff seem evident in this episode, where Board members seem to play a role in "testing" testifiers.

Board member Lowery questions ABS's Mcleod following completion of Mcleod's testimony. Lowery asks about which wells in which locations indicate pollution. Lowery begins with restrictive yes/no questions as though probing Mcleod's claim to expert status. Mcleod re-

sponds with technical details, which can be understood as an attempt to verify his claim to specialized knowledge. As soon as Lowery asks a more open-ended question ("So where were you collecting data ...?"), Mcleod gives a summary interpretation as though the specialist-client negotiation has been consummated with Mcleod being granted expert status. At this point, Lowery returns to more specific questions, which could indicate that he is not ready to surrender to Mcleod the measure of authority that Mcleod seems to desire. Seeing the "usurper's" claim to expert status as tenuous in this moment, the "rightful heir," staff member Groves, interjects responses to Lowery's questions. That is, Lowery says, "Isn't it your case that data from these monitoring wells isn't available yet, or is it?" Groves replies, "Yes, it's available." Mcleod says the same thing, "There are routine analyses available, yes." Lowery asks, "And what is it showing?" Groves, not Mcleod, responds, "It's showing — near the site, we're finding slightly elevated levels of chloride" In responding here, Groves seems to remove Mcleod from further negotiations.

This apparent, though subtle, struggle for the privilege to speak can also be seen in the overall pattern of alternating turns to speak and interruptions. Mcleod's turns to speak diminish in length and frequency during this episode, and those of Groves expand and grow in frequency. Groves interrupts Mcleod near the middle of the episode and, as just shown, near the end responds to a question even though Mcleod seems ready to respond.

The lines of action that occur here intertwine. First, Lowery seems to seek responses to clarify his understanding of the physical world situation. Second, there is what can be seen as a struggle in the social world between Mcleod and Groves as to whose interpretation of the physical world will prevail. This struggle is important in this particular case because the interpretation of the situation as a "threat to pollute" is not agreed on due to uncertainty in physical world measurement and in legislated mandate. The intertwining of these lines of action comes in Lowery's apparent decision of which voice, implying which interpretation, to favor. This decision seems to be a joint selection of what to believe and whom to believe. Arguments about what to believe are contained in the content of Mcleod's and Groves's responses. Arguments about whom to believe are contained in both the content and the form of responses.

If Lowery was merely judging the physical world (what to believe), it should not matter who conveys that information. Both Groves and Mcleod exhibit fairly thorough knowledge of the situation. To Mcleod and Groves, though, it does

seem to matter whose account Lowery hears. Both signal their range of knowledge and facility with technical terms as though they are courting Lowery. These signals can be interpreted as facets of the negotiation of a relationship. The client, Board member Lowery, seems to be deciding which of the specialists should gain an edge in expert status. The Board-staff, client-specialist, status relationship is being tested.

Lowery can be understood to signal the measure of expert authority that he grants in the phrasing of his questions. Restrictive, yes/no questions tend to constrain the specialist's latitude in interpretation. Less restrictive, "symbolic," yes/no questions (questions that are phrased yes/no but for which a yes/no response is not expected, and an elaborated response is expected) give the specialist more latitude in responding. Who, what, when, where, and how questions open the door for a summary interpretation by the specialist. This sort of interpretation conveys an understanding of the physical world. In this case, this understanding has implications for the Board's verdict. Mcleod's summary interpretation for Lowery, where he states that wells tested for pollution (and hence the pollution itself) are all "up well within the site boundary" implies that the limited extent of pollution does not pose a "threat to pollute." Thus, a summary interpretation permits a specialist to promote a desired course of action (here, a ruling in favor of ABS). A Board member's request for a summary interpretation can be understood to signal receptiveness to a new or newly reinforced version of a situation in the physical world. This receptiveness is a step for the Board member toward asking the specialist, "What should I do next?"

A focus on just the identity issues arising in hearing testimony indicates that the Board's pronouncement of a verdict on the case and reaching a verdict on the Board-staff relationship may be closely tied. That is, even if the hearings are a ritual ratification of a predetermined verdict (indicated by the 99% success rate for the staff), the ritual is not concluded until the Board-staff relationship has been "negotiated." It has been negotiated in the sense that it is opened to challenge and reconfirmation. Even if only symbolic, such negotiation may be important to legitimate the proceedings. From this perspective, Mcleod's arguments challenge the Board-staff relationship. This threat would explain Groves's ready interjections. Board member Lowery's seeming preference for the staff responses appears to reflect trust based on what staff members say, and Board members' public pronouncements confirm, are years of mutual respect and support. Loyalty based on consistently met expectations can be understood to have steered Lowery to-

ward the well established relationship with the staff.

This negotiation occurs in a cycle. The more the Board believes the staff's version of the ABS situation, the more consistent staff statements become with Board understandings, and the more secure becomes the staff's edge in expert status over a rival. This cycle continues until the Board is comfortable with making the primary

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decision at hand, a verdict in the case or public confirmation of a predetermined verdict. This cycle, which can occur either in public during the hearing or in private before the hearing, exemplifies the process of the social construction of reality. It illustrates the belief that a representation of the physical world is real contains an inescapable element involving belief that a certain individual (an "expert") has the authority to proclaim that representation as real. When faced with uncertainty about what is real and possible, Water Board members can be understood to select a voice of authority via a joint negotiation of meaning and identity, a negotiation of expert status.

Implications

The microscopic analysis of "performance" in technical conversations analyzed here and elsewhere [1], [2] supports a shift in emphasis away from a view of decision making as a process by which information is simply sorted into categories supporting one option or another. Convincing us of the logical action to take need not be seen as the root of the "expert's" power. The "expert" can be understood to use information — and we listeners use that information as evidence — to construct a relationship of influence, an expert-client relationship, such as the relationship between the Water Board and its technical staff. One may select an "expert" actor for a decision making ritual in order to become

comfortable with the choices that result (see Colson [8] for more on decision making rituals). Conventionally, assignment of expert status might be seen as a means to an end — a way to gain assistance in making a decision. The interpretation presented here supports the idea that the nonexpert may view assignment of expert status as an end in itself, as establishment of a comforting relationship. As a result, some decisions appear to be more a choice of whom to heed rather than simply of what to do.

For the "expert," a similar question arises about means and ends. The "expert's" influence in the moment of decision is part of what may be, or may become, an ongoing relationship. For the "expert," which is the primary goal — to influence the decision or to secure the relationship? (See Jackall [50, ch. 6], on how management consultants preserve their relationships with executives in large corporations.) This relationship is something on which the "expert" draws to sustain and extend expert status, as the discharger's consultant can be understood to have done in the eyes of his client. The client/decision maker's satisfaction helps to secure that relationship.

This focus on relationship implies that public hearings and conferences are about both conveying information and establishing status. Public presenters can be understood to act as though they are having their identities, and not just their arguments, evaluated [51]. Audience members, too, can negotiate for expert status by asking the clever question, pointing out the obscure technical point, or laughing in concert with high-status figures. Similar "performances" can be seen to occur in private.

Both form and content of an utterance tell the listener a great deal, because a presentation, or any conversation, is also a "performance." In sum, we may be relying on the relational part of communication in technical decision making to a much greater extent than we imagine. That relational part may indeed explain how some people get taken seriously and others don't.

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