Getting Observations: Strategic Ambiguities in Social Interaction

Eric M. Leifer/Valli Rajah

Zusammenfassung: Im Kampf um begehrte Rollen erwächst dem Empfänger adressierter Handlungen ein strategischer Vorteil. Das Problem ist, daß man, um adressierte Handlungen zu empfangen, diese erst einmal senden muß, um so Antworten einzuwerben. Zwei Ambiguitätsformen werden eingesetzt, um adressierte Handlungen zu empfangen, ohne den eigenen Vorteil aufzugeben. Zielambiguität verschleiert, an wen sich adressierte Handlungen wenden, während Inhaltsambiguität eine empfangene adressierte Handlung nutzlos werden läßt. Diese beiden Ambiguitätsstrategien werden in verschiedenen settings veranschaulicht, wobei das Problem gestellt wird, wie der Übergang zwischen ihnen bewältigt wird. Da jede dieser Strategien dazu tendiert, sich selbst zu perpetuieren, können sie das Auftreten distinkter Rollen innerhalb der Interaktion verzögern. Rollen kristallisieren um ein Scheitern im Kampf um den Empfang adressierter Handlung, sobald es jemandem gelingt, eine nützliche Beobachtung zu erhalten.

Introduction

A few years ago, psychologists at the University of California conducted an experiment in which male undergraduates immersed one hand in cold (14° C) water for 60 seconds and, in a separate trial, did the same with the other hand, but with an extra 30 seconds added during which the temperature was increased by one degree. When given a choice between repeating one of the two trials, over 70% of the subjects chose to repeat the longer, „more pain" trial. The psychologists drew various conclusions regarding the apparent effect of the mild easing of pain at the end of the experience on how pain is remembered (Kahneman/Fredrickson 1993).

Ignored, however, was a distinctly social element. Present during the trials was a female laboratory assistant whose job was to be attentive to the pain of the male subjects. Thus each male subject was the recipient of a female's concern. In the longer 90-second trials, the male subjects gained an extra 30 seconds to observe how the female assistant was orienting towards them. Outside the laboratory, far more serious discomfort is sometimes endured in order to get observations on how others are oriented toward us. Sacks (1995, 32-9), for example, has suggested that suicide threats and attempts are sometimes ploys to get observations of this sort.

Soziale Systeme 6 (2000), H. 2, rlag Leske + Budrich, Opladen S. 251-267.

The high value placed on getting others to direct actions toward us suggests a basic principle in social interaction: It is strategically better to receive directed actions than to send them.[1] This principle holds wherever coveted roles are up for grabs, because here the meaning of a directed action is determined by the reaction it elicits. The recipient of a directed action has the latitude to claim a coveted role through an appropriate reaction (Leifer 1988). Because of their high value, directed actions must actively be sought out. It is more a matter of getting observations, or directed actions, than passively waiting for them.[2]

Two problems arise from the basic principle, which drive social interaction. First, how can one get observations without first giving them away? We offer two types of strategic ambiguity as solutions. *Target ambiguity* obscures who action is being directed towards, and hence serves as bait to lure directed action back. Should actors engage each other, as in dyadic interaction, *content ambiguity* is used to elicit directed actions without first offering clear observations. Action is needed to get observations. To maintain a strategic advantage, however, either the target or content of action must remain ambiguous.

Second, a problem arises regarding the transition between target and content ambiguity. What makes this transition problematic is that both target and content ambiguity are self-perpetuating – each elicits more of the same. To break the cycle created by either, some kind of failure is required. We argue that the emergence of dyads, as well as stable inequalities within dyads, grows out of ambiguity failures in the struggle to get observations. Ambiguity successes can account for a wide range of stable phenomena, including turn-taking and other forms of civility, while ambiguity failures can explain some sharp discontinuities in social interaction.

Below we argue that recognized inconsistencies in social interaction have given rise to inconsistencies within theories of interaction, and suggest that the two ambiguities can resolve the latter. Then we develop target and content ambiguity, offering illustrations in diverse settings, before turning to the transition problem. We conclude with some implications for mainstream sociology. By treating actions as the property of the observers they are directed towards, new insights and measures become possible.

---

1 Our principle is a more general statement of Clausewitz's (1976) claim that the role of defense in war is stronger than the role of aggressor. Aggressors direct action to the defender, putting the latter in the position of getting observations and reacting (taking a stand). Many of the subtle consequences Clausewitz derived from his claim are echoed in the results of this paper, though Clausewitz sometimes resisted his own powerful logic in maintaining a fondness for heroic leadership over ambiguous action.

2 „Getting observations", as we develop it here, is different than „getting attention". As a rule, getting observations (and status) means sacrificing attention, while getting attention means sacrificing observations (see Derber 1979). Only rarely does the real world approximate the experiment described above, where both attention and observations were to be had by a basically passive subject.

Problem Development

Once we recognize the advantage of getting observations, an element of competition enters into social interaction. In sociological perspectives, competition is often ignored. Instead, sociologists tend to see consensus and cooperation as underlying social interaction. According to Parsons (1951, 38), „the basic condition on which an interaction system can be stabilized is for the interests of the actors to be bound to conformity with a shared system of value-orientation standards."

Later, Gouldner (1960) asserted a universal „norm of reciprocity", which served as both an essential stabilizing mechanism for social systems and a starting mechanism for interpersonal relations. With this norm in place, actors could wander around in a strategic sleep freely giving observations, without concern for how they might be exploited. Though Goulder at one point acknowledged equal and unequal reciprocity, his actors did nothing ex ante to secure an advantage for themselves in the terms of exchange.

Empirical support for this strategically „sleepy" view of interaction comes primarily from two sources. One is the tremendous amount of coordination that is needed to keep interaction going. Interactants take turns. They wait for others to finish, begin immediately thereafter, and concede to the next turn-taker, with a choreography that sometimes rivals a much rehearsed theater piece (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974). How could the smooth flow of social interaction be produced without an underlying cooperative intent on the part of all involved?

For Collins and Hanneman (1995), for example, micro-interaction is a cooperative effort aimed at the production of emotional energy and solidarity through collective ritual. When one person stops speaking, someone else instantly jumps in to keep the ritual from floundering. Or consider Bakhtin's view of turn-taking, in which active and passive positions are exchanged when the listener perceives that the communicative intent of the speaker has been exhausted. „In each utterance ... we embrace, understand, and sense the speaker's speech plan or speech will, which determines the entire utterance, its length and boundaries" (1986, 77), and thus the appropriate moment for the transfer of a turn.

A second source of support for the sleepy view is the empirical importance of status and roles in the interaction process. Different statuses, attached to different roles, come with distinct expectations regarding the nature of one's participation within interaction. These expectations become the basis for patterns of deference, support, volubility, and a host of other interaction behaviors (Berger et al. 1972). Troyer and Yount (1997) have shown that interactants are more sensitive to others' expectations than their own. Actors for the most part internalize their roles, they claim, and do what is expected of them.

We accept the fact that social interaction is coordinated, and roles are important. The dispute here is over what produces the coordination and

roles. In the sleepy view, these come from a mix of internal (benign) intentions and situational norms that remain in place before, during and after interaction. In our strategic view, something can be gained from interaction itself that requires strategic alertness to secure. Complementary roles can emerge within interaction, which confer unequal statuses. We assume actors are not indifferent to their fate in striving for the most coveted roles.

The sleepy view of interaction was first challenged by the work of Goffman. He argued that alertness is required to maintain involvement, to manage impressions, to avoid embarrassment, and to save face. „Every face-saving practice which is allowed to neutralize a particular threat opens up the possibility that the threat will be willfully introduced for what can be safely gained by it. An encounter … becomes less a scene of mutual considerateness than an arena in which a contest or match is held" (Goffman 1967, 24). Goffman observed that great changes in status can occur in milliseconds, and hence he recognized the need for unremitting alertness. It is, for example, „always a gamble to make a remark. The tables can be turned [when through a successful riposte] ... He is made to look foolish" (1967, 25). As long as actions depend on reactions for meaning, they cannot be proffered lightly.

Yet Goffman saw his work as embellishing rather than rejecting the mainstream sleepy view. Impressed by the enormous amount of accommodation in social interaction, at one point he postulated a „rule of considerateness" to go along with the more egocentric „rule of self-respect". Together, these rules lead a person to „conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his face and the face of the other participants" (1967, 11). According to Goffman, a person is made to look foolish only as punishment for threatening the face of others. Goffman's theory appeared to limit the use of weapons in interaction to defensive purposes. They are needed only because attack is anticipated. By preparing his interactants for an attack, however, Goffman irretrievably introduced the aggressor into sociology.

Goffman's ambivalence regarding the importance of competition in interaction has been reproduced in more recent work as images of shared norms and contests, of trust and strategy, are commingled in some logically disconcerting ways. Scanzoni (1981) employed the zero-sum (pure conflict) game as an appropriate model midway into his book on the struggle over rights and duties within marriage. He failed to note, however, any tension with his earlier, more cozy view of marital relationships. Since marriage can abruptly turn into pure conflict, a consistent theory is needed that allows for observed interaction inconsistencies.

In a detailed study of conversation within intimate couples, Kollock/Blumstein/Schwartz (1985, 34) note that „speaking turns can have attached to them responsibilities, obligations, or privileges ... [and hence] may not be equally distributed and are often fought for". Yet, „a certain amount of work must necessarily be done by the participants if the interaction is to go smoothly" (1985, 35). Invoking a shared normative framework suppresses

the strategic considerations raised by the fight metaphor. Here again, observed inconsistencies (of accommodation and conflict) should not preclude consistency in the way sociologists think about social interaction.

Ethnomethodologists have observed subtle strategies at work within interaction, but refuse to embed them within a struggle over status conferring roles. Instead of identifying brilliant ploys and foolish mistakes, every utterance assumes equal validity in a setting where actors never seem to acquire identities, in the sense of enduring terms of trade vis-a-vis particular alters. Drew (1984) comes close to going further in his analysis of reporting as strategy:

> If a speaker wishes to invite a recipient to come over or do something together, again there are options available: to go ahead and explicitly invite them, or to hint at an opportunity for some sociability and leave it to the recipient to propose an arrangement explicitly ... [the latter] is achieved through the speaker reporting [an activity or circumstance] but withholding saying anything about what that reporting might implicate (for a getting together) (146).

Drew then proceeds to point out that

> because they thereby avoid taking an official position, speakers leave themselves the option of subsequently revising their position in the light of the other's initial reaction, though any such revision may itself be done implicitly through further reporting. Thus participants may negotiate positions, make concessions, stand firm or hold out on some matter, but without any of these activities having been done officially (147).

Drew has uncovered the underlying struggle in interaction, but lacks the tools to carry his analysis further. What is the struggle over, and how can it be „won"? Without embedding interaction in contexts of roles and accumulated victories and defeats, it is impossible to identify where reporting should and should not be used.

For the purpose of theorizing, it is useful to start with a setting where no role (or status) differentiation exists. The imagery is one of undifferentiated actors milling about, waiting and watching for a directed action to occur (e.g., as in the managerial setting described by Gibson 1998; a similar starting point is adopted by Zeggelink 1994 and Mark 1998). Rather than see this as a „state of nature" assumption, it might be more accurately viewed as a distinctly modern situation (White 1992, 25-7). In village life of the past, the sins of parents and follies of youth cast villagers into distinct roles early on. Now people are constantly being pulled out of such overdetermined settings and, through careful sorting or self-selection, are being placed in new settings with others just like themselves.

In these modern settings either external status is irrelevant for internal rankings (cf. Lawler/Ridgeway/Markovsky 1993) or the rules of translation of external into internal status are ambiguous and themselves subject to contention (cf. Ridgeway/Johnson 1990). Graduate student cohorts, management trainees, voluntary associations, and so on, are all settings where the struggle for stature must begin anew. Anywhere that orderings are only partial, intense struggles can occur even in the smallest of opportunity

spaces. Such settings are where there is the most to gain from interaction, and where each encounter can have enormous consequences.

In the sleepy view, differentiated roles are treated as givens and used to account for behaviors and expectations. In our view, the struggle over roles provides the main impetus for social interaction. Once roles have emerged, the intense mutual orientation of interaction subsides. Strict turn-taking, for example, becomes less important, as is evidenced by the greater incidence of interruptions and silences alike in established relationships. It is the absence of shared understandings that compels interactants to monitor each other so closely and place such great value on getting an observation. Once roles have emerged, actors are largely freed to shift their strategic attention elsewhere.

We need to start with the conditions necessary for complementary roles to emerge in social interaction, and then work backwards to the strategies actors use to best position themselves. Our starting point is the advantage gained from receiving a directed action, or getting an observation. The recipient is in a position to define the role frame with an appropriate reaction. To put oneself in the position to get an observation, without first conceding the advantage, two forms of ambiguity are used. These are developed in the next two sections, where we show that the cooperative appearance of social interaction can be explained by the competitive struggle to get observations.

Battles are associated with war, yet they are a relatively rare event even within warfare. Inaction and repositioning are much more common (Clauswitz 1976). So it is with the contention over roles in social interaction. Most time is spent milling about, watching what others are doing and trying to best position oneself for a possible engagement. Crucial is the sporadic shift from being a bystander to being a sender or receiver of directed action, for it is from the ensuing engagements that statuses can get conferred. We show how both engagement and disengagement in social interaction comes from the quest to get observations without first giving them away.

Content ambiguity

The roles actors struggle for in interaction do not exist as behavioral prescriptions which reside in people's heads. They are something that must be conferred by others through interaction. This holds whether we are talking about the role of leader or that of friend or lover: either way, subjectivity without conferral amounts to little. Only a madman such as Cervantes' Don Quixote can ignore this fundamental constraint. Indeed, in the second book of this knight-errant's adventures, his fame had become so widespread, and his particular brand of madness so admired, that those he encountered more often than not humored the knight by readily accepting complemen-

tary roles, dispelling what small doubt Quixote himself harbored on the matter of his identity.[3] In conferring a coveted role, someone must acquiesce to a complementary role that carries a lower status. Teachers must have students, leaders must have followers, and benefactors must have beneficiaries.

Laying claim to a role requires that action be directed to a prospective role complement.[4] The trouble is that any action that can be linked to a superordinate role can also be linked to a subordinate one through an appropriate reaction. A gift confers prestige if it is received with gratitude, but signals servitude if more is demanded. A remark can make you clever or foolish depending on the riposte. And an act of authority which no one recognizes exposes one's vulnerability. Unilateral role claims are strategically vulnerable, as they confer considerable latitude on the prospective role complement (Leifer 1988). Such claims lay an action in front of someone for observation, and hence invite a reaction that can give the action a disadvantageous meaning.[5] Herein lies the advantage of getting observations, of receiving directed action rather than sending it.

Interaction is necessary to acquire coveted roles, and thus is at the forefront of the ambitions of all those milling about. But interaction is laden with dangers, as it entails a mutual directing of action. Smart actors want to receive observations from others, but generally it is necessary to solicit these, which means giving observations away. The only way to avoid conceding the advantage along the way is to strip the content from what is given others to observe. In effect, this entails directing actions that cannot be associated with any particular role. Such actions are said to be „content-ambiguous".[6]

There is little advantage to getting observations if they are too ambiguous for a meaning to be affixed to them. Any effort to attach a meaning through a reaction is likely to appear as a role claim itself, and hence will

---

3 This example was provided by David Gibson.

4 Not discussed here is the necessary role of a „public" – onlookers who witness role claims and enforce role outcomes. Publics are formed by those milling about in the a setting who are not currently engaged in struggles of their own. They are discussed in the next session.

5 It is in assigning such importance to the reaction of the recipient that we diverge most radically from the Skvoretz/Fararo (1996) model. Like them we begin with the assumption of initial disconnectedness, and then envision the accretion of social structure as occurring in the course of dyadic interaction. However, in contrast to them we problematize the moment of „pattern interpretation" – when meaning is assigned to an initial overture – and, in the process, allow the recipient a strategic opportunity to come out on top with a deft reaction. This possibility is precluded by Skvoretz/Fararo (see esp. 1996, 1378-81).

6 Leifer (1988) refers to content ambiguous action as „local action" to emphasize its disconnect with „global" role-based actions, while Padgett/Ansell (1993) call it „robust action" to emphasize its independence from specific assumptions intents or meanings. Content ambiguous action can be interpreted only ex post, in light of whatever direction social interaction takes.

be vulnerable to a deft counteraction. Moreover, not only will the content-ambiguous action not cleanly fit with the reaction into a role frame (e.g., leader-follower), but it will also prove consistent with whatever role-frame eventually emerges. Thus it, in retrospect, can be adapted to many possible outcomes. These desirable properties make content ambiguity self-perpetuating as both sides struggle to get useful observations without giving the other anything useful to observe. Content ambiguous action becomes the coinage to purchase more observations for both sides, and hence is both directed and received in what passes for turn-taking.

One example of target-ambiguity can be found in Jackall's description of the impression-management practices of adroit managers, who „stress the need to exercise iron self-control and to have the ability to mask all emotion and intention behind bland, smiling, and agreeable public faces. One must avoid both excessive gravity and unwarranted levity. One must blunt one's aggressiveness with blandness. One must be buoyant and enthusiastic but never pollyannaish. One must not reveal one's leanings until one's ducks are in a row" (1988, 47). In upper-level managerial circles, where alliances must frequently be dissolved and formed anew, one's commitments – both to powerful players and their substantive views – must be kept flexible, and open to reinterpretation whenever the balance of power shifts. This flexibility, or „openness", is, according to Jackall, the sine quo non of advancement.

For a more extended illustration from another realm, we select the fateful telegraphic exchange between Russia's Prime Minister, Aleksandr Fedorovich Kerensky, and its military Commander in Chief, Kornilov, shortly preceding the October 1917 revolution, as reproduced by Pipes (1990, 455-6). Kerensky was faced with the task of determining whether Kornilov would support him against the Bolshevik threat or stage a coup to preempt the Bolsheviks. At the time of the exchange, the Prime Minister feared that Kornilov would go against him because General Vladimar Nikolaevich Lvov had given the prime minister a fabricated ultimatum purportedly from Kornilov in which he had demanded political control. Kerensky's challenge, then, was to determine the accuracy of Lvov's account of Kornilov's intentions. As a ploy, Kerensky pretends at one point to be Lvov, who in fact was not present at Kerensky's end of the telegraphic connection.

Prime Minister Kerensky: How do you do, General V.N. Lvov and Kerensky are on the [telegraph] line. We ask you to confirm that Kerensky can act in accordance with the information conveyed to him by Vladimar Nikolaevich [Lvov].

Kornilov: How do you do, Aleksandr Fedorovich [Kerensky]. How do you do, Vladimar Nikolaevich [Lvov]. To confirm once again the outline of the situation I believe the country and the army are in, an outline which I sketched out to Vladimar Nikolaevich [Lvov] with the request that he should report it to you, let me declare once more that the events of the last few days and those already in the offing make it imperative to reach a completely definite decision in the shortest possible time.[7]

7 Leifer (1988) refers to content ambiguous action as „local action" to emphasize its disconnect with „global" role-based actions, while Padgett and Ansell (1993) call it

Prime Minister Kerensky [impersonating Lvov]: I, Vladimar Nikolaevich, am inquiring about this definite decision which has to be taken, of which you asked me to inform Aleksandr Fedorovich [Kerensky] strictly in private. Without such confirmation from you personally, Aleksandr Fedorovich hesitates to trust me completely.

Kornilov: Yes, I confirm that I asked you to transmit my urgent request to Aleksandr to come to Mogilev [where Kornilov was staying].

Prime Minister Kerensky [as himself]: I, Aleksandr Fedorovich, take your reply to confirm the words reported to me by Vladimir Nikolaevich [Lvov]. It is impossible for me to do that and leave here today, but I hope to leave tomorrow. Will Savikov [Minister of War] be needed?

Kornilov: I urgently request that Boris Viktorovich [Savikov] come along with you. What I say to Vladimir Nikolaevich [Lvov] applies equally to Boris Viktorovich [Savikov]. I would beg you most sincerely not to postpone your departure beyond tomorrow ...

Prime Minister Kerensky: Are we to come only if there are demonstrations, rumors of which are going around, or in any case?

Kornilov: In any case.

Prime Minister Kerensky: Good-bye. We shall meet soon.

Kornilov: Good-bye.

Content ambiguity reigns in this exchange. As Pipes (1990, 456) notes, „Kerensky never stated what he was asking and Kornilov never knew to what he was responding". While Pipes considers the dialogue „a comedy of errors with the most tragic consequences", it is far from obvious what else Kerensky could have done. Kerensky turned to interaction to probe the nature of his relation with Kornilov, and seemed quite aware that the particular role frame that might emerge between the two of them depended considerably on the interaction itself. Had he not engaged in content-ambiguous action, and instead revealed his suspicion from the outset, such a revelation might have been interpreted by Kornilov as a sign of weakness, and given Kornilov the courage for rebellion.

In the end, Kerensky was able to buy time – a day – for more observation. During this time, Kornilov proceeded with his preparations to bring troops to the capital. Rather than interpret this as an effort to help the government suppress the anticipated Bolshevik uprisings, Kerensky saw it as a mobilization for a military putsch. It was Kerensky who initiated the break with Kornilov. This rift between the provisional government and the military created an opportunity for the Bolsheviks, who grabbed power a month later.

In interaction like that above, each actor watches for a failure in content ambiguity, hoping to observe some action that will warrant a reaction which fits the observed behaviors into an advantageous role frame. Since actors skilled at content ambiguity are not likely to err in this fashion, role resolution can be deferred indefinitely. Each actor is compelled to take a turn

---

„robust action" to emphasize its independence from specific assumptions intents or meanings. Content ambiguous action can be interpreted, ex post, in light of whatever direction social interaction takes.

acting in order to solicit more observations after the other has ceased acting. The failure to take one's turn may be received as a role claim in itself, and in any event will interrupt the flow of incoming observations. Interaction otherwise flows along seamlessly, lacking an event to mark changes in actor statuses. But once one side slips and distinct and separate role expectations are imposed by onlookers, the struggle that constitutes social interaction is over. Strategic attention turns elsewhere.

Target ambiguity

In the midst of dyadic interaction, there is no ambiguity over who action is being directed toward. Every action is delivered as an observation, and hence is loaded with potential consequences. Outside of the dyad, the presence of multiple (real or imagined) actors milling about allows for ambiguity over just who action is being directed toward, or „target ambiguity". One way to conceal who is being targeted is to address an entire group, as a category of people or a specific gathering. Tocqueville once observed that an American „speaks to you as if he was addressing a meeting; and if he should chance to become warm in the discussion, he will say 'Gentlemen' to the person with whom he is conversing" (1976, 142). Even a sole listener may not be confident that he or she can claim the status of a target.

Target ambiguity is often used in political discourse. Consider excerpts from the speech made by John F. Kennedy during his historic trip to Berlin on June 26, 1963. At the time, the trip was controversial because politicians and citizens around the world were divided over how the U.S. should deal with communism. Kennedy made the following remarks:

> There are many people in the world who really don't understand – or say they don't – what is the great issue between the free world and the communist world. Let them come to Berlin.
>
> There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin.
>
> And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere „we can work with the Communists". Let them come to Berlin.
>
> And there are even a few who say that it is true that Communism is an evil Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect: But we have never had to put up a wall to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us …
>
> While the wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the communist system, all the world can see we take no satisfaction in it, for it is … an offense not only against history, but an offense against all humanity.

Presumably the unnamed others – „them" – a referred to in the speech were critics of Kennedy's foreign policy. Some contemporary political commentators asserted that the speech underlined the problems caused by French President Charles De Gaulle's isolationist policies. Others said it was prompted by Washington's concern over the plans for the establish-

ment of a multilateral nuclear force (NATO). Kennedy effectively used target ambiguity insofar as various individuals could have supposed themselves to be the target of his critical remarks, but Kennedy could deny this should they direct action back. Because the content of his remarks was so clear – that communism was dangerous and evil – a directing action back to Kennedy in a defensive response would appear weak and foolish. Use of target ambiguity allowed for content clarity, by concealing to whom the message was intended.

Target ambiguity, like content ambiguity, is a form of bait. It is tossed into a setting in order to get an observation — an action directed back. But among skillful actors, the bait is carefully avoided. Target ambiguity is something that everyone can use. Everyone struggles to become a target, in getting observations, without making others targets in the process. Target ambiguous actions are tossed into the setting from all sides, with no connection between them. They cannot be sorted into actions and reactions, and thus nobody gets drawn into interaction. Target ambiguity, like content ambiguity, can be self-perpetuating if everyone does it right. But the first forestalls dyadic interaction, while the second keeps it going.

In a setting of undifferentiated actors milling about, each is driven by the urge to receive a directed observation and casts target ambiguous actions into the setting as bait. Some strike poses, others report, and still others harangue. Everyone spends most of their time listlessly watching others, however, taking care not to react directly to what they see lest it be recognized as a directed action. Most of what they cast into the setting matters for little, and there is no accounting of who offers what. In a meeting, for example, it is not the person who speaks the most that emerges with the highest standing, since loudmouths abound; it is the one who is addressed the most. Content hardly matters, with criticism being as valuable as praise. At the annual sociology meetings of late, rational choice theorists relish the growing criticism they are receiving as they concurrently receive more sessions and awards. Others cloak the attacks more carefully, in comments on reductionism or quantification, and hence deprive the rational choice theorists the distinction of being directly addressed.

For something to happen, in status terms, there must be failures in target ambiguity, however minor. Some actors start getting addressed more than others as the failures begin to accumulate, or at least appear to in the perceptions of savvy insiders. Once this inequality in being targeted starts to appear, it grows into what is commonly called a Matthew effect. Addresses are cast increasingly in the general direction of those who are addressed the most, as a directed address from them is worth the most. But this proceeds slowly, where ambiguity around targets is only gradually reduced. Direct targeting is avoided, for it concedes the advantage of getting an observation.

As it starts to be evident that some actors are being addressed more than others, the urge to solidify this emerging differentiation into status-conferring roles will mount. For status to be conferred, action must be d-

rected. The first directed actions will flow to those who seem to be getting addressed most, from those who seem not to be. A swift reaction will lock in a role frame, one advantageous to the reactor. To others milling about, the exchange will only confirm what they suspected – a the actor who seemed to be addressed most was indeed worthy of a coveted role. But the actor who has slipped into the less desirable complementary role gains visibility from this very recognition, and hence gains new chances to be addressed. In contrast, milling about, in itself, offers nothing.

Still no real interaction has surfaced, where the struggle over coveted roles is not instantly resolved. As status differentiation progresses, however, rivalries for status become narrowly drawn around those occupying similar positions. Rivals become aware of each other, and are watched closely by those in role relations with them. Their latitude for target ambiguity decreases as their actions become increasingly assessed in terms of the rivalries. Whatever they do is intended for their rivals, and vice versa, but extreme caution is taken not to target action directly. Pressure mounts for a direct struggle, for social interaction, to resolve the issue of relative standing. But how can social interaction be entered (or exited) without losing the advantage that might be sought from it? This is the transition problem.

The Transition Problem

Content and target ambiguity provide ways to pursue the advantage of getting observations without first conceding this advantage. The first undermines the value of what is observed, while the second obscures who gets the observation. Both ambiguities are self-perpetuating, though each produces a very distinct state of affairs. Target ambiguity fosters disconnection among its users, where addresses of all sorts are haphazardly tossed into the setting as a whole. Content ambiguity yields intense connections and strict turn-taking. If both ambiguities are self-perpetuating, how is the transition made between them and hence between their distinct accompanying states of affairs?

Failure plays a central role in dislodging actors from self-perpetuating processes, in inserting a ”turning-point” (Abbott 1997) with irreversible consequences for all that follows. Content ambiguity always threatens to resolve itself into determinate meaning. A gift may be a little too large, or a concession made a little too quickly. This becomes painfully apparent when a swift reaction, in front of onlookers, casts an action in a light (however unintended) that cannot be convincingly denied. There is little point to further struggle, or interaction. Likewise, the targets of action can be inadvertently identified through accidental eye contact, or a slip of the tongue. Again, a swift reaction renders inescapable for everyone present something that was never intended, that one person had been selected over the others

as recipient. Over the long haul, such failures are pivotal in constructing identities for actors who would otherwise be perpetually and facelessly milling about (White 1992).

The possibility of failures, however, does not really resolve the transition problem. Failures produce status differences where they previously did not exist. They disrupt the self-perpetuating state of affairs, but do not shift actors between target and content ambiguity. Any failure in target ambiguity means that the game is over, for one is instantly slotted into the subordinate role with no hope of redemption through content ambiguity. Getting from the stage of milling about, unconnected, to that of direct subordination to someone else is all too easy; the trick is in getting past the first without falling into the second, landing instead on the ledge of content ambiguity where the one-on-one contest can run its course.

Skilled actors must ease themselves into relationships with one another, reciprocally lessening the degree of target ambiguity practiced until such a time as they can address one another directly with only minimum risk of appearing overly enthusiastic, interested, or committed. This transition entails at the same time the gradual augmentation of content ambiguity, as targets come into focus and unambiguous actions become a liability. One can safely direct clear (in role terms) action to nobody in particular, or unclear action to someone in particular, but directing clear action to somebody carries grave risks, and directing nothing to nobody deletes one from the social registry altogether.

Each type of ambiguity is a matter of degree, and the trick of a successful transition lies in the graduated replacement of one by the other. Success in making the shift from target to content ambiguity thus may be more of an art form than either strategy taken in its pure form, for it entails the continual monitoring of both ambiguities as they are exercised simultaneously, in the effort to maintain the necessary proportions as one strategy supersedes the other. If the balance is upset, one risks either offering too little bait in the way of content, bungling the catch entirely, or offering too much to a voracious competitor, granting an instant victory to one's prey. The shift from the stage of milling about to that of dyadic interaction, then, must be seen as enormously problematic.

A possible solution to the transition problem comes in the form of civilities. Civilities are the grease of social life. They allow actors to bump into each other without major consequences for their struggles to achieve standing. In every social setting there is a small subset of actions that can be mutually directed without consequence: „Hello. How are you doing?" „Fine. How are you?" „Fine."[8] It is best to stick to the script. Do not say that anything is wrong. Civilities give you a moment to strip content from your action, before you are left face-to-face in interaction. To say what is

8 A subtle property of this common sequence is that it leaves the target in the position of directing action back. If a mutual desire to engage does not exist, the target can initiate exit civilities to escape the encounter without consequence (see Leifer 1988). Silence is also a possibility – to press the initiator into offering content.

actually troubling you requires a particular role relation, one that ensures your gripes are met with sympathy. And this is something you may have to first struggle to get.

Consider the following account of a lower-class neighborhood in modern-day Java. It illustrates how difficult it can be to move from target ambiguity into real interaction.

> When we [the author and his family] returned to Sitiwaru in 1979 a new family was renting the house across the alleyway from ours ... They appeared worthy additions to the kampung [neighborhood]. But they were not part of it and were still outside of it when we left, one year later. Certain signs made it plain the young couple were kampung people and wanted very much to be accepted by their new neighbors. Their polite greetings were always answered politely but never permitted to develop into extended conversations. Nobody visited their home and they were not free to visit neighboring homes ... In the evenings, the young mother would carry her baby over to her front gate, which stood close to two benches, packed each night with lively, gossiping neighbors. Nobody in these bench groups would acknowledge her presence unless she spoke. When she did, there would be a noticeable drop in the level of general conversation: some person would respond briefly to her overture, then turn away, and the group would go back to its discussions. Each time, the snub was palpable if not crass. The woman must have felt hurt, even frightened; she would surely have been lonely (Sullivan 1992, 52).

The young mother appears condemned to mill about unacknowledged. Her addresses were to the group, and hence were target ambiguous, but members of the group, playing the same game, were reluctant to direct action back. What responses she got were brief and uninviting, and mostly likely contained only the minimal civilities. It would be interesting to probe who in the group actually responded, in terms of their status. The problem the young mother faced was not one of being unworthy of group membership; rather, nobody in the group had any basis to know what claims the young mother was aiming to make, and this may have accounted for each member's nervousness when she appeared at the gate. Addressing her would only have boosted her ambitions.

Discussion and Conclusion

We started with a basic principle: It is strategically better to receive directed actions than to send them. In pursuing the implications, we uncovered two types of ambiguity that are essential for treading the minefields of social life. With target ambiguity, undirected action is used as bait to attract directed action. With content ambiguity, directed actions cannot be fit into a role frame by a reaction. These two ambiguities allow actors to actively search for observations without first conceding the advantage in the process. But their widespread use makes actually getting a useful observation a rare event.

It does not take much effort to confirm the basic principle. Marshal up a meaningful action, like a generous gift, and lay it in front of someone with

whom you are contending for status. See if the action comes to mean, for others watching, what you intended it to mean. See if you have lost ground in the setting. If you have not lost ground, would you try the experiment again? People do not always make good use of an advantage. But it is not prudent to depend too heavily on lucky breaks.

Once recognized, the struggle to get observations begins to pop up everywhere. You cannot go to a meeting or run into someone on the street without being aware of the struggle. It is not that anything has changed – you see everything you used to see. It is just that you feel something is always about to happen. There is a tension particularly in social interaction that you never noticed. Someone always seems on the verge of getting a useful observation. Most of the time it does not happen, and when it does the action and reaction produce roles that seem perfectly natural after the fact. What makes you conscious of the struggle rarely resides in what you see happening, but in your expanded sense of what *could* happen. This is what you confirmed in the experiment, in making something happen.

Beyond providing a useful tool for praxis, the basic principle has a number of sociological implications. One is to expand the conception of action held in sociology. Sociologists have treated the meaning of an action as resident in the head of the person acting. But the recipient of a directed action is actually the one who controls the meaning through a reaction. Directed action is the „property“ of the one who receives it. To retain any control, actors must obscure the target or content of action. The fateful moment an action acquires a definite meaning marks a failure in social interaction. An actor has lost control over his or her fate by being cast into a role frame set by a deft reaction.

Herein lies a deep irony. Taking possession of one's own action, as something that has both a target and an assignable meaning, is the best way to lose control over the action's consequences. To insist on one's own meanings and intents fails to acknowledge the recipient's property rights. It turns the actor into a hapless victim of the reactor. Skilled actors modify their subjective understandings in response to emergent external developments. Taking more interest in actions received than ones they themselves send, they let others try to give their action meaning. Such efforts get them observations.

A second sociological implication is that competition and cooperation are not necessarily opposing forces. It is precisely the struggle over meaning that accounts for cooperation in the form of turn-taking and civility. Actions are used to get observations, in what becomes a give-and-take exchange of targetless or contentless actions. Consensus over roles, and hence expectations, emerges only through an ambiguity failure. It is more an endpoint than starting point of social interaction. A relationship is always clearer looking back, when seen through the lens of failure. As they are being constituted through ambiguity strategies, they could always go in many directions.

That is why Scanzoni (1981) can use a model of pure conflict for mar-

riage, Clausewitz (1976) can theorize about war without battles, and Leifer (1991) can discover cooperation in chess games. If the problem of social interaction is one of getting observations, then the cooperative or conflictual intents of actors are less important than the strategies they must employ to get observations. To be a good lover, or victorious warrior, a role must be conferred. One needs to get observations first, to know when it is safe to let one's intentions surface. Until one gets a (useable) observation, the spouse, warrior, and chess player may behave strangely alike.

Why give intentions more reality than actions? Why view social interaction through the lens of ambiguity failures rather than successes? By doing so, purely sociological objects cannot be seen. These are objects built from the ambiguity strategies, by astute actors more interested themselves in getting observations than in their own intentions.

Finally, the way network analysts treat relationships, or „ties", needs rethinking. Networks represent relations between people, or „nodes", in terms of varying types of ties. For example, subjects are asked „Who do you go to for advice?" or „Who do you discuss close personal matters with?" Answers to such questions are used to construct networks, which end up representing all action contexts as dyads. Not only do network representations rule out target ambiguity, but they also leave no room for content ambiguity within ties. For ties to acquire a clear type, some failure must occur in target or content ambiguity. Thus it may be that much of what preoccupies astute actors is neglected by network analysis, which concerns itself with the remnants of past failed contests while ignoring those in progress.[9]

Literature

Abbott, Andrew (1997): On the Concept of Turning Point. Comparative Social Research 16, 85-105.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986): Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (Trans. by Vern W. McGee). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Burt, Ronald S. (1992): Structural Holes. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Clausewitz, Carl von (1976): On War (Trans. and ed. by M. Howard and P. Paret). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Collins, Randall, and Robert Hanneman (1995): Modeling Interaction Ritual Theory of Solidarity. (Forthcoming in The Journal of Mathematical Sociology).

Derber, Charles (1979): The Pursuit of Attention: Power and Individualism in Everyday Life. Boston: C.K. Hall.

Drew, Paul (1984): Speakers' Reports in Invitation Sequences. S. 129-152 in:

9 It was initially Burt's (1992) insight that mutual orientation begins not with a direct tie between two people, but with a degree of equivalence in their connections to assorted third parties.

Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (Hrsg.), Structure of Social Action: Studies in Conversational Analysis. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Gibson, David R. (1998): Where Does Volubility Come From? (Unpublished).
Goffman, Erving (1967): Interaction Ritual. New York: Pantheon Books.
Gouldner, Alvin (1960): The Norm of Reciprocity. American Sociological Review 21, 161-178.
Jackall, Robert (1988): Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers. New York: Oxford University Press.
Kahneman, Daniel/Fredickson, Barbara L. (1993): When More Pain is Preferred to Less: Adding a Better End. Psychological Science 4, 401-405.
Kollock, Peter/Blumstein, Philip/Schwartz, Pepper (1985): Sex and Power in Interaction: Conversational Privileges and Duties. American Sociological Review 50, 34-46.
Lawler, Edward J./Ridgeway, Cicilia/Markovsky, Barry (1993): Structural Sociology and the Micro-Macro Problem. Sociological Theory 11, 268-290.
Leifer, Eric M. (1988): Interaction Preludes to Role Setting: Exploratory Local Action. American Sociological Review 53, 865-868.
Mark, Noah (1998): Beyond Individual Differences: Social Differentiation from First Principles. American Sociological Review 63, 309-330.
Padgett, John, and Christopher Ansell (1993): Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400-1434. American Journal of Sociology 98, 1259-1319.
Parsons, Talcott (1951): The Social System. New York: The Free Press.
Pipes, Richard (1990): The Russian Revolution. New York: Vintage Books
Ridgeway, Cicilia/Johnson, Cathryn (1990): What is the Relationship Between Socioemotional Behavior and Status in Task Groups? American Journal of Sociology 95, 1189-1212.
Sacks, Harvey/Schegloff, Emanuel A./Jefferson, Gail (1974): A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation. Language 50, 696-735.
Sacks, Harvey (1995): Lectures on Conversation. Vol 1. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Scanzoni, John H. (1972): Sexual Bargaining: Power Politics in the American Marriage. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
Skvoretz, John/Fararo, Thomas (1996): Status and Participation in Task Groups: A Dynamic Network Model. American Journal of Sociology 101, 1366-1414.
Sullivan, John (1992): Local Government and Community in Java. New York: Oxford University Press.
Tocqueville, Alexis de (1976): Democracy in America. New York.
Troyer, Lisa/Younts, C. Wesley (1997): Whose Expectations Matter? American Journal of Sociology 103, 692-732.
White, Harrison, C. (1992): Identity and Control. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
Zeggelink, Evelien (1994): Dynamics of Structure: An Individual Oriented Approach. Social Networks 16, 295-333.

Prof. Eric M. Leifer, 56 Lynk Rd, Hudson, NY 12534

Valli Raja, The Center for Violence Research and Prevention
The Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University
60 Haven Avenue, B4-432, New York, NY 10032