INTERACTION PRELUDES TO ROLE SETTING: EXPLORATORY LOCAL ACTION*

ERIC M. LEIFER
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

In most settings, roles are givens and role behavior is a salient ideal for retaining status. Yet in settings that admit only like actors, coveted roles often can only be acquired through interaction. During the interaction prelude to role setting, claiming a coveted role through unilateral role behavior is strategically vulnerable. A distinct action ideal, called local action, is needed to avoid role claims until there is evidence a claimed role will be conferred. Ironically, local action suppresses role differentiation when used by both sides in interaction. The exchange of local actions yields a self-perpetuating prelude, or stable balance, between actors who each seek coveted roles that would put the other in less desirable complementary roles. Local action thereby provides an explanation for balanced reciprocity and casts new light on balance as a purely local phenomenon. No longer must generalized role behavior (i.e., the norm of reciprocity) be invoked where roles are not given. The coexistence of two salient ideals (local action and role behavior) should alert us to discontinuities in behavior as settings and ideals change, as well as to the pockets of ambiguity that are a part of larger role structures.

Roles are a powerful construct in the social sciences. Norms attached to roles guide the behavior of role occupants and provide them a basis for mutually consistent expectations and interpretations (Parsons and Shils 1952; Parsons et al. 1961; Scott 1971). Violating norms carries penalties, whereas conforming to them ensures the actor rights and status. Hence, role behavior stands as a salient ideal that exerts real pressure in settings. This salience makes role behavior central in both normative and positive social science; it is useful for both prescription and prediction.

In some settings, however, roles are not "givens" that constrain interaction, but are something that actors must acquire through interaction. These settings are commonly engineered through self-sorting, selection committees, personnel departments, league regulators, or even old fashioned matchmakers (Blau 1977; Rosenbaum 1984; Markham and Teplitz 1981). The engineering removes the historical or attributional bases for assigning roles by bringing similar actors together in processes that could differentiate them. The roles needed for interpreting action and forming expectations must first be acquired before role-based norms can constrain interaction. What is the salient ideal for acquiring, as opposed to occupying, a coveted role?

The literature fails to provide adequate guidance here. In the status attainment literature, for example, the status outcome of role acquisition is correlated with family and educational background variables (Knotterus 1987). Although this literature reveals powerful institutional screening and sorting mechanisms, it provides actors no guidance in face-to-face competition with others who have similar credentials. The face-to-face struggle for coveted roles *is the most intense where screening and sorting have already run their course.*[1] Here

* Support from the National Science Foundation (SES 8610363) and the University Research Council at UNC-Chapel Hill is gratefully acknowledged. I benefited from the comments of Peter Bearman, Debra Friedman, Peter Marsden, David Sciulli, Harrison White, and an anonymous *ASR* referee.

[1] Ronald Breiger has pointed out that this claim is nicely illustrated in Geertz's (1973) account of Balinese cockfights. Here the status struggles of rivals are extended to their cockfights. When cocks of rivals of equal status fight, interest and betting increase; otherwise, the audience remains indifferent. In modern sports, interest and intensity are heightened where league regulation controls for all factors that make outcomes predictable (Leifer 1988). In commodity futures markets, Abolafia (1985) similarly recognizes the importance of regulators for understanding chaotic trading behavior in screening who gets onto the trading floor. In

actions could matter the most, and an action ideal is most needed.

Although the microanalyses of ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists have yielded rich descriptions of interaction, they fail to distinguish ideal from nonideal action (Goffman 1967; Garfinkel 1967). Their commitment to the "experience of actors" and their rejection of "alienating" analytical constructs (Turner 1974; Heritage 1984) prevent them from resolving the question of whose experience salient ideals should be grounded on. Individuals invariably fall short of achieving ideals in interaction. In their purest form, ideals are accessible only through analysis; yet this does not lessen their pressure on individuals. The analytical issue of what *could* happen in interaction looms large behind what *does* happen.

Not all ideals are salient, however, and many ideals would fail or even backfire if they were widespread enough to be salient. Boudon (1981), for example, has shown why increasing educational attainments does not increase status even though education and status are correlated at the individual level. In courtship, expressing "least interest" confers power on one partner (Blau 1964), as long as the other partner does not tap this source of power with equal vigor. For an ideal to be salient, it must remain an ideal even if it is widely pursued. Role behavior is such an ideal, being most relevant where it is most widely known and pursued.

But what about settings where roles are not established? Generalized norms have been posited for such settings. These norms are thought to have the same force as specific role norms, constraining actors to deny specific roles as vigorously as they reinforce them. This, however, simply ignores the issue of how coveted roles are acquired and how status inequality is produced from interaction. The central generalized norm is the norm of reciprocity. This "moral constraint" mysteriously allows for both balanced and imbalanced reciprocity, and hence merely cloaks the struggle for status-conferring roles.

The present analysis dispenses with norms where roles are not established. It assumes that actors seek status and gain it by acquiring status-conferring roles. It also assumes that legitimate status differentiation is possible within a setting and that there is no basis for establishing roles other than through the actors' own efforts. The analysis centers on the dyad (actors A and B), with a "public" in the background. An action ideal is derived, called local action, that allows the actors to avoid claiming a (global) role until there is evidence it will be conferred. Ironically, when both actors use local action, status aspirations are perpetually suppressed. The ensuing exchange of local actions provides a more robust foundation for balanced reciprocity than the norm of reciprocity.

The analysis follows in the tradition of Clausewitz ([1826] 1976) and Elias ([1936] 1982). Neither author tampers with intentions in explaining changes in behavior. Clausewitz, insisting that the object of war is always to destroy the enemy, uses strategic intelligence in balanced conflicts to explain the subtle maneuvering in warfare that deferred decisive battles and hence the opportunity to realize global objectives. Elias explains the emergence of civility from less civil feudal behaviors by tracing changes in the setting of behavior that obscure the distinction between friends and enemies. The present analysis moves beyond specific substantive or historical contexts to map out theoretical possibilities for action and its setting that flow from the constant intention to seek status.

THE VULNERABILITY OF UNILATERAL ROLE BEHAVIOR

Role behavior depends on its role setting for interpretation. A simple action, such as "A smiles at B," would have a different interpretation if A exploited B rather than loved B. When roles are assigned, role behavior serves only to reinforce roles. The smile may display the attentiveness of the lover or the greed of the exploiter. But if roles are not assigned, actions may appear consistent with divergent roles settings. The vulnerability of trying to step directly into a role with unilateral role behavior stems from the power it confers on the role complement to define the role setting. Following Emerson (1962), the power that A's unilateral role behavior confers on B stems from: (1) A's *dependence* on B for a response that reinforces A's role claim; and (2) the *alternative* responses open to B. These sources of B's

---

the present analysis, we look for an action ideal where action could be most effective and nowhere claim the ideal is useful where action would be futile.

power and, hence, A's vulnerability, are examined in this section.

Roles are defined in terms of norms or duties, with respect to other roles, and the rights derived from the duties of other roles that are directed toward the focal role. In the dyadic case, some of A's duties are taken as B's rights and some of A's rights derive from B's duties. The definitional interdependence or complementaries between roles give rise to a fundamental dependency in the status acquisition process. A coveted role cannot be acquired without the accommodation of a role complement. There cannot be leaders without followers, benefactors without recipients, or teachers without students. The claimant of a coveted role is dependent on someone accepting a complementary role.

This dependence would not be problematic if the targeted role complement had no alternatives. If gifts compel gratitude or commands compel obedience, a coveted role could be acquired by the quickest claimant. Indeed, if role behavior were perceived in the setting as evidence for a role, and hence of a role's complement, role behavior would put pressure on the apparent role complement to conform to an emerging set of expectations. Yet the dependence of role behavior on role setting for interpretation gives B alternatives to reinforcing A's role claim. Before the role setting is established, A's role behavior can be linked to more than one role through B's response.

The absence of given roles creates strategic latitude in B's response to A's unilateral role behavior. Unilateral role behavior leaves open a range of role possibilities that are constrained only by a response that fits both action and response into a possible role setting. Responses help define the role setting in which they must be judged as appropriate or inappropriate. Until roles are established, B's response cannot be deemed inappropriate. The immunity B enjoys in responding makes A strategically vulnerable.

The importance of this strategic latitude is heightened by a second fundamental feature of the status acquisition process. There is a peculiar symmetry where the same actions that confer status can also take it away, depending on the responses they elicit. Great swings in fortune are possible when coveted roles are too heatedly grabbed. The teacher role claimed through a didactic monologue can turn into a student role if the monologue elicits an evaluative or critical response. A command can put one in a powerful or impotent role depending on whether or not it is obeyed. More generally, giving can either signify great prestige or the lack of it, whereas taking can signify great power or the status of a beggar.

The more unilateral commitment A displays in claiming a role, the more vulnerable A becomes to B's response. With the appropriate response, B can place A's actions into a role setting that undermines A's role claim. If, however, A's commitment to a role is ambiguous, B's efforts to lock A's actions into a status-inferior role could backfire. B's commitment to a complementary role could be used by A to turn the tables on B.

The above argument is illustrated in Figure 1. A's unilateral role behavior is insufficient in fixing the role setting and status interpretations. These depend on B's response to the role behavior. Only when role settings are established can actions have unique interpretations that are shared by both actors and an interested public. Henceforth, "given" (or established) roles will refer to roles with a set status interpretation, as opposed to role complements that arise from isolated actions that yet lack a status interpretation. What actions should be used to establish a coveted role?

LOCAL ACTION

A coveted role is acquired when it is both taken and given. However, considerable effort is needed to synchronize this taking and giving. What should A do before B's conferral is assured? A would like to observe evidence of B's willingness to grant the role before displaying a commitment to taking it. However, action is needed for there to be interaction to observe. A must use actions to buy the ability to observe B's willingness. An ideal is needed for buying this ability without foreclosing coveted role possibilities in the process. This allows A to make full use of the observations.

For example, in courtship A might want to avoid appearing as the most or least committed. Should B, then, display a clear commitment, A would be in a position to feign less interest, thereby acquiring power over B (Waller 1937). Should B, however, feign this lack of interest first, A could follow suit and force B into the most interested role to

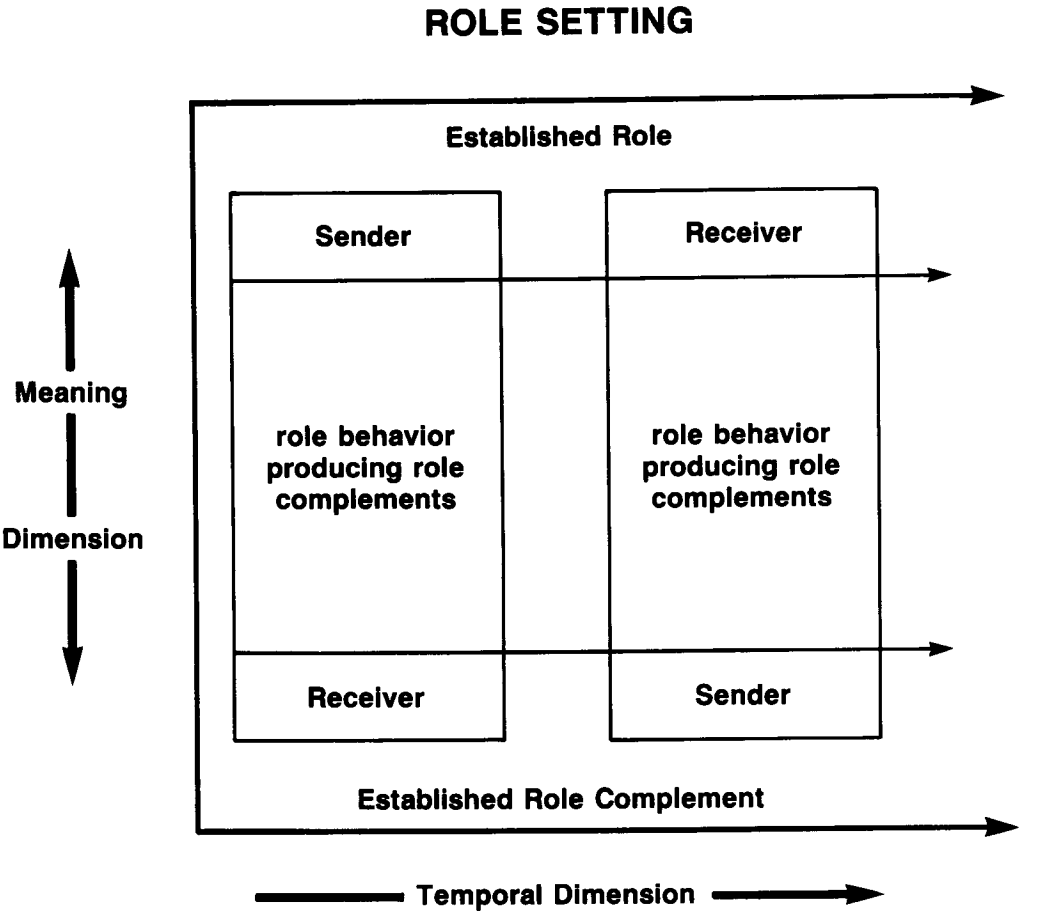

Figure 1. Basic Components in Role Behavior

salvage the relationship. Blau (1964) recognized the danger of prematurely claiming the more "powerful" role of the less interested, but he failed to suggest what should be done *before the claim can be advantageously made*. Instead, Blau predicted that both sides would repeatedly grab for the role in the process of "brinksmanship," where *neither* retains control over status prospects. Though this can occur, it is no ideal.

Nonrole-specific action is needed that, ex ante, leaves open a range of roles and, ex post, does not prove inconsistent with any role that might be claimed later. If shared meanings (role definitions and status interpretations) represent a "global" level, nonrole-specific actions can be viewed as "local." Local actions are drawn from a repertoire built up through practice and experience. Such a repertoire is consistent with Collins's (1981) idea of cultural resources and Swidler's (1986) notion of culture as a tool kit. Both theorists aim to bring culture down from the level of formally shared meanings to the level of informal practice. We should not, however, forget the importance of the global level, because it is where aspirations are defined. The local level serves as a kind of safety valve. Because the global level is so important, it must be avoided until it can be entered at the right place.

The delicate appropriateness of local action to its setting has led theorists to treat it as evidence for generalized norms. This overstretches the meaning of norms because they are given the task of both reinforcing and denying roles. Such simple actions as greetings or common courtesies gain their significance from the role possibilities they leave open. Lumping them together with actions that reinforce established roles entirely ignores the distinct problems they resolve. Of course, local action can include more innovative and sophisticated finesses that are not yet

sufficiently widespread to be mistaken for generalized norms. In either case, local action has fundamentally different value and temporal properties than normatively prescribed role behavior.

The difficulty of interpreting local action in terms of specific roles serves a dual purpose. Should A see an opportunity to claim a role, past local action will not undermine this claim. On the other hand, should B try to lock A into an undesired role, A can turn the flexibility of local action against B in a counterclaim that exploits the commitment B must display to lock A into a role. The best kind of flirtation or provocation, for example, leaves A the option of appearing indignant should B respond as one who is encouraged or provoked. The aggressor, Clausewitz ([1826] 1976, p. 370, 377) writes, "is always peace loving, he would prefer to take over our country unopposed. . . . It is the defender, who not only concentrates his forces but disposes them in readiness for action, who first commits an act that really fits the concept of war." A cunning "aggressor" might succeed in accusing a "defender" of aggression. Local action on both sides would make it hard to disentangle aggressors from defenders.[2]

In local action there are always latent role possibilities that remain thinly submerged. To a naive onlooker, it can only seem paradoxical that so much effort is expended on actions that accomplish so little toward the acquisition of coveted roles. The temptation is to conclude that social actors are "really" not status seekers. The onlooker would be fooled by local action, however, and by the cunning with which status seeking is allowed to surface only when status is willingly conferred. If there is genuine shame in being accused of status seeking, it comes from having sought status at the wrong moment and not from having sought it. Perhaps the greatest hero in American culture, George Washington, accumulated status by only accepting status that was truly conferred (Schwartz 1983).

The energy expended in local action cannot be justified by what it directly accomplishes. Status derives from roles, and local action is decoupled from specific roles. Local action marks a deferment of status aspirations. No "maximizing" or even "satisficing" properties are demanded from local action.[3] Only subsequent actions can justify local action, insofar as these actions secure a coveted role. In contrast, role behavior is justified ex ante in terms of the roles that the action and expected response will reinforce. With local action, however, actors relinquish this ex ante control to erect the setting and monitor the opportunities that interaction brings.

As its name suggests, the significance of local action does not extend far beyond itself. Local action neither secures coveted roles nor constrains future interaction. Rather, it marks an intense involvement in interaction itself (Leifer 1988). The decoupling and deferment that go along with local action leave only the present to focus on. The interaction to be observed has to be constructed in a present that moves only with the construction. The actor must remain at this task until an opportunity to acquire a coveted role arises. This, of course, depends on the kind of action that local action elicits.

Local action buys A the ability to observe interaction, and for this it must elicit B's action. The many role possibilities that local action keeps open for A puts a complementary set of open possibilities before B. These possibilities keeps B's involvement alive as they offer opportunities for role-defining action. A's local action, however, puts B in a position of needing to observe more action. A's local action cannot be tied to a role setting advantageous to B. A could too easily slip out and build a counterclaim around the commitment reflected in B's efforts. Thus, A's local action only heightens B's need to make more observations before committing to a role. B buys the ability to make more observations with local action. So the observations A bought with local action are local

[2] When Walzer (1977) sets out to distinguish "just" from "unjust" wars, he encounters difficulties that are a good index of local action because local action greatly complicates the attribution of individual responsibility.

[3] This allows local action to function as a safety valve. The pressure of justifying every action by what it will bring about needs some release when such a calculation is problematic. Simon (1957) showed how maximization was infeasible, but left actors to satisfice in poorly defined settings. I simply go one step further in allowing actors to defer judgments while using actions merely to erect the setting. Value is conferred on local actions only *ex post*, when role ambiguities are resolved.

actions themselves. These merely fuel the need for more observations, and so it is for B also. A and B can become stuck alternating local actions as each looks for an opportunity to acquire a coveted role.

Whereas role behavior forces sender and receiver into distinct roles, alternating local actions suppress role differentiation. Alternating local actions conceal a willingness to claim or confer specific roles. There are no "true" roles to be discerned ex post, but only sustained possibilities that lure A and B on. The very setting that motivates local action, one without given roles, is sustained through local action. Any effort to break the cycle by claiming a role is strategically vulnerable. In this respect, there is an odd kind of accommodation that occurs as each side helps the other avoid roles, lest the role they attach to the other be mistaken for their own role claim. Decoupling and deferment become chronic conditions, though hardly recognized amid incessant efforts to discern opportunities for status-conferring roles. At no point does A *or* B lose control over status prospects, though neither may ever attain a coveted role. It is this control over status prospects that makes local action both an *ideal* for acquiring roles and a stable basis for thwarting role assignments.

Maintaining tight control over status prospects ironically involves loosening (ex ante) control over actions. Thus, local action violates deeply ingrained notions of agency that see action as means that are oriented ex ante toward ends (Parsons 1966). Proprietorship over local action is always ambiguous. Each local action both purchases action to observe from others and is purchased by their prior actions. In taking there is giving, and vice versa. The production of role complements in role behavior degenerates, and with it goes the possibility for status differentiation across role behaviors. Both value and temporal dimensions, which are so instrumental in role behavior, collapse (see Figure 1). What emerges is not at all exotic: a balanced reciprocity that conceals the struggle for status in a veil of politeness.

RETHINKING RECIPROCITY

At the purely empirical level, reciprocity entails the alternation of directed action where A, acting toward B, is followed by B acting toward A. This is a universal feature of social life. To explain reciprocity, anthropologists and sociologists have invoked a universal and generalized norm of reciprocity. The alternation of directed action is viewed as the alternation of giver and taker roles, where the norm of reciprocity obligates those who have taken to give to those who have given.[4] The general nature of the norm allows it to function as a "flexible moral sanction for transactions which might not otherwise be regulated by specific status obligations . . . a kind of all-purpose moral cement" (Gouldner 1960, p. 174).

Applicable where no specific status obligations (i.e., roles) are established, the norm of reciprocity is seen as a "starting mechanism" for establishing solidary relationships (Gouldner 1960). A gives to B, creating complementary giver-taker roles, and expects the norm of reciprocity to prompt B to give in return. A must give as a "giver" to make a taker of B, and thus makes no immediate demands on B. This commitment obligates A to then take from B as a "taker" to protect the prior giver role. Thus, B's giving in return does not terminate the exchange, but rather obligates A to give again by the norm of reciprocity, and so on, in a process that assumes the appearance of reciprocity.[5] The moral constraint of the norm eliminates, so it might be argued, the strategic vulnerability of A's initial unilateral role behavior. This argument needs to be closely examined.

Many argue that a norm of reciprocity is

---

[4] Focus is on "direct" as opposed to "indirect" or "generalized" exchange where, say, A gives to B, B gives to C, and C gives to A (see Ekeh 1974). The latter can be analyzed in the same status-seeking terms, where actors vie for status from collectives rather than from other actors (see Goode 1978). If the role of publics is explicitly introduced, as suggested in the final section, the two categories of exchange would not appear very different.

[5] This interpretation makes more sense than the standard interpretation, which lets the continuation of exchange rest on the failure to ever strike an even balance. After providing this standard interpretation, Foster (1977, p. 23) notes, "The dyadic contract is effective precisely because partners are never quite sure of their relative positions at a given moment." There is a difference between being "never quite sure" and avoiding an exactly even balance. It takes surety for the latter, and this would seem to accompany an operative norm of reciprocity.

necessary to account for the difference between social and economic exchange (Ekeh 1974). Distinct temporal and value constraints appear in the former that are not found in the latter. On the temporal dimension, there are observed delays between the directed actions of each side. Directing action back too quickly can disrupt reciprocity. On the other hand, too long a delay can also disrupt it. On the value dimension, actions perceived as "not enough" or "too much" can disrupt reciprocity. The norm of reciprocity must function to keep actors within these bounds.

By invoking a norm of reciprocity, the temporal and value constraints can be interpreted as follows. The delay is essential for establishing giver and taker roles across interactants. The delay ensures that giving is done in the absence of a contractual obligation for a return, and taking lacks a contractual obligation to return. The value constraint is similarly tied to the alternation of giver and taker roles. Since the value of an action is tied to the role it is directed from, reciprocity revolves more around the exchange of roles than around the objects or services used to create these roles. The value constraint, working in conjunction with the temporal constraint, *dictates how much of a giver and taker each side is to be.* Role identities do not play a part (within economic theory) in economic exchange, which lacks the delays to distinguish roles and posits a source of value (aggregate supply and demand) that is independent from the role identities of the exchangers.[6]

In this interpretation, feelings of trust (for the giver) and indebtedness (for the taker) ride along with the role alternation and provide cues for action. These feelings are viewed as essential ingredients for solidary relationships, and there is a tendency to use these feelings to link the norm to "balanced" reciprocity (Gouldner 1960; Foster 1977). Yet theorists concede that "imbalanced" reciprocity is also possible. In the patron-client relationship, for example, an exchange of loyalty and service occurs for a valued resource like land or a position that reinforces unequal status relations (Schmidt, Guasti, Lande, and Scott 1977; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Gouldner (1960) proposes a quantitative view of reciprocity where "equal" returns to no return at all are possible.

The matter is not easily resolved. Gouldner evades the problem by making the terms of exchange an "empirical question" without providing guidelines for how we could empirically distinguish between balanced and imbalanced reciprocity.[7] The status outcome is the only solid basis for distinguishing the two reciprocities, but how can we posit a starting mechanism that is evident only in outcomes? If the norm is so mysterious, how are actors to infer and hold others to its terms? How can a violation of the norm be distinguished from the emergence of legitimate status differentiation? As long as the norm of reciprocity is consistent with virtually any terms of exchange, its function as an ex ante constraint is highly problematic.

Suppose that A and B have faith in a norm of reciprocity. Lacking assigned roles that define specific obligations, they appeal to the generalized norm of reciprocity for guidance. In giving to B, A trusts that B (watched by an interested public) knows what and when to reciprocate so as not to violate this norm. A must figure out what to give B in order for B to acknowledge a taker role. If A's giving is seen as taking in the attention that giving demands, B (with public support) may feel it is A who is now obligated to give. This ambiguity would not be possible if the roles of A and B were established, but we cannot assume that they are in evaluating a starting mechanism.

The effort A must expend to avoid role

[6] Recently, sociologists who look closely at market phenomena have found that price determination is linked to market roles (White 1981; Leifer and White 1987; Baker 1984). Given the way that economics and sociology are encroaching on each other (Hirschleifer 1985; Schotter 1981; Granovetter 1985), resting interpretation on fundamental differences between economic and social exchange seems quite fragile.

[7] Rae (1981), who devotes a book to demonstrating the ambiguity of equality, should be required reading for reciprocity theorists who try to slide easily by the concept of balance. Gouldner, for example, thought that the exchange of the "same" object (say, dinners) is an obvious sign of balanced reciprocity. Yet, obviously, giving a dinner can impose greatly different hardships on the actors. However, if we shift to the subjective value level, how can comparisons among actors be made? In the present analysis, balance is tied to deferring valuations rather than mathematically equating them.

ambiguity in giving raises interesting possibilities. B could fail to relinquish the taker role. Any dissatisfaction of A could terminate giving; yet continuing to give would signify that B has power over A. The more effort A initially put into establishing a giver role, the more B is enticed to test the conferred power over A. The more A has invested in establishing a giver role, the more B might stand to gain from A's apparent commitment to the role. B could use this commitment to lock A into the giver's role, convincing a public and even A that B fully deserves favorable terms. These dynamics are well illustrated in the literature on courtship mentioned above.

Rather than being dissatisfied with the giver role, however, A might appear committed to seeking the prestige that giving can confer. This commitment would deny B any opportunity to seek prestige from giving. Thus, B might be discouraged in trying for the giver role by A's clear prior commitment to it. If B tries but fails to express sufficient gratitude, he or she would confer additional prestige to the magnanimous A.[8] Unwilling to do this, B could terminate the relationship or try to thwart A by showing enthusiasm for the taker role and hope A will beg for something in return. In the latter case, A would have to continue giving to an ungrateful B to salvage the interpretation of past giving.

The effort to carve out clear giver and taker roles triggers a process of status differentiation where the object is to fix giver and taker roles rather than alternate them. The social prestige held out to the giver whose generosity cannot be adequately repaid, or the social recognition of power granted to those who can take more than they give, discourages role alternation. Yet the fact that the roles of both giver and taker can grant or rob one of social distinction can stimulate a battle over how claimed roles are to be interpreted. Each participant depends on the behavior of the other; the giver is a fool if the taker is too satisfied with that role, and a taker gains little social distinction from taking from an enthusiastic giver. Status gains are dependent on the dissatisfaction of the less distinguished side that accompanies a willingness to continue taking what is given or giving what is taken. Actors must cling enthusiastically to the role they defend to resist an unfavorable status interpretation. No alternation of roles occurs.

A resolution to the struggle results in status differentiation that is an acceptable part of the social setting. A successful strategy for a status-conferring role becomes evidence of the role itself and is justified by the actor's right to it. As long as status differentiation is a possibility, B cannot be held accountable for violating a norm of reciprocity. There is no way to distinguish between legitimate status differences and a violation of the norm. Any punishment for failing to alternate roles would have to come *after the terms of exchange are established*. But then a norm of reciprocity can hardly be a "starting mechanism" in establishing these terms. A deeply ingrained norm of reciprocity cannot be invoked to explain why actors do not exploit prospects for status, because they *do* exploit them. An interested public expects them to and gives them more status when their success is pronounced.

The difficulty with the norm of reciprocity stems from the tension it creates between the temporal and value constraints. The mandatory delay between directed actions is used to create giver and taker roles at each moment in interaction. Thus, at no moment in exchange can there be a "balance" on the value dimension because at every point one side would be indebted to the other. At the start of exchange, there is a temptation at each moment to lock into a role and favorably interpret it in status terms. As long as status issues have not been resolved, the prospect for legitimate status differentiation each moment threatens to disrupt reciprocity. In contrast, local action eliminates the tension between temporal and value constraints by changing their interpretation. A continuous

[8] In never seeming to find adequate words to praise a benefactor, the beneficiary confers prestige on the benefactor. When a "beneficiary" suggests that the "benefactor" is being exploited, neither gains social distinction. If the benefactor complains about the grip that the beneficiary has on him and still continues to give, the benefactor acknowledges the power of the beneficiary. Galaskiewicz (1985), for example, shows the great effort corporations expend in linking their giving to high community status. Galaskiewicz (p. 26) notes that the "primary function of (interpretations that link giving and status) is to allay the fears of donors that they are somehow 'suckers'." The "sucker" is another possible status interpretation for the giver role that its claimants must keep in mind.

balance becomes both possible and meaningful when local action fails to induce clear role complements. Thus, local action provides a more robust explanation for balanced reciprocity, one that is ironically grounded on the actors' best efforts to seek favorable imbalanced reciprocity.

BALANCED RECIPROCITY AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

Local action's suppression of role complementarities gives new meaning to the value constraint in reciprocity. The taking involved in giving and the giving involved in taking are deliberately entangled in every action. Role ambiguity in each action is reinforced by the obscure origins of involvement that prevent either side from interpreting directed action in terms of giver and taker roles. Ambiguity is maintained over the balance of giving and taking in each action and over the balance of giver and taker in the roles that direct action. Past roles are not protected by embracing new ones. Neither side is ever clearly in or out of debt to the other, unless this is revealed by subsequent actions. The valuations that could be placed on giving and taking have to be deferred until giver or taker roles are discernible. The host thanks his guests for coming to his party. The guest respond that the pleasure was their own. Despite the insistences of each side, the issue is left unresolved. The value of giving the party or taking the companionship of guests is deferred. Actions become mere receptacles for value to be placed in later.

If we slice into reciprocity, at any moment, we should not be able to distinguish a giver and taker or the status differentiation that these roles can imply. Only subsequent actions can tip the balance between giving and taking in actions and roles. Days later, should the opportunity arise, the party host can emphasize either the party he gave or the companionship he took. The ambiguity that cloaks the value at the moment of action *affords the flexibility to lessen or magnify what was given or taken,* depending on subsequent actions.

Directed action, the seeming prerogative of the actor, can nevertheless be claimed by the one to which action is directed. Without established roles to disentangle the responsibilities of sender and receiver, their jurisdictional boundaries *can be opaque at the point of contact.* The attendance of guests is exappropriated by the host as an act of taking to offset the giving of a party. Reciprocity appears as the alternation of giving and taking only if directed action is confused with giving. The balance of giving and taking in each directed local action is threatened when "too much" or "too little" is directed. The value constraint in reciprocity is satisfied by the *avoidance of action that could be interpreted as a claim to a giver or taker role.* Here actors struggle to accommodate each other in not taking full possession of their own actions, to avoid the appearance of a unilateral role claim.

If directed actions do not disrupt balance by differentiating roles, then why would the length of delay between actions matter? The upper limit to this delay is tied to the success of local action in eliciting observed action. Local action sustains the involvement of those to whom it is directed by leaving open role possibilities. Once A stops acting, B has only the same currency as A for buying more action to observe. The local action A used to elicit B's action leaves B needing more action to observe. The longer A goes without acting, the more B is forced to use local action to prompt A, especially when B's inaction signifies a commitment that A can exploit. This puts an upper limit on the delay between A's and B's actions.

A minimum delay is needed to define the terms of the exchanges made with local action. A buys the ability to observe B's action and therefore ceases acting to observe. A's local action, however, was purchased with B's local action, where A is left to define how much action B gets in the exchange. Thus, B waits some time to be convinced that A has finished. B would not wish to cut off any action that might prove useful for locking A into a role. The period that A waits for B's action and B ensures that A is through acting defines a lower limit on the delay between actions.

This explanation of an upper and lower limit in the delays between actions does not involve moral constraints. The delays do not define clear giver and taker roles and have nothing to do with decorum or trust. They come from using local action to buy action to observe. The same action buys and is bought, defining what is purchased while eliciting action that will serve the same ends. A framework for simultaneous exchange must

await the resolution of roles, which allows the value of an action to be determined independently from what happens in subsequent interaction. The emergence of such a framework, or the cessation of interest in one, would disrupt balanced reciprocity.[9]

Balance in reciprocity comes neither from a mathematical equating of value nor an alternation of roles. It rests on deferring valuations as roles remain unestablished.[10] Imbalance in reciprocity comes about only when roles emerge that confer unequal statuses on actors. These two reciprocities are not arbitrary points on a single continuum, but derive from two wholely distinct ideals for action. *Balance is a purely local phenomenon,* sustained *through local action.* A does not violate a norm in doing too much or too little for B, or in reacting too slowly or too quickly to B. A merely shifts to a global level of action where norms become relevant and role claims are made. This raises the possibility of behavioral discontinuities, which are discussed in the next section.

Local action has allowed a reinterpretation of reciprocity in which balanced and imbalanced reciprocity can be given analytic attention rather than being merely noted. The latter results from a failure of local action in remaining sufficiently local. Another result is that balanced reciprocity acquires a stable basis in local action, one that is not strategically vulnerable. There is no need to squeeze balanced and imbalanced reciprocity out of a single norm of reciprocity. We can simply drop this overworked norm of reciprocity and recognize two ideals for action that bring people together in very different ways.

THE TWO SALIENT IDEALS

Actors look toward two ideals for guidance, local action, and role behavior. Role behavior is the ideal way to retain the status conferred by roles. Local action is the ideal way to seek status where roles are not established. The two ideals, tailored for these distinct settings, lead the actor down divergent paths. Roles are claimed through role behavior, or role claims are avoided through local action. The relentless pursuit of status in distinct settings produces this divergence.

The present analysis is more Machiavellian than are economic analyses based on a "self-interest" in which the utility of B can be readily admitted into A's utility function (Becker 1976). Status, unlike utility, is not left open for subjective determination.[11] Status is held in the public domain. The pursuit of status necessarily has social consequences, and success or failure is measured both by others and by the actors. The extremes of selfishness and altruism must be subordinated to strategic considerations in the pursuit of public status. As public strategies, neither selfishness nor altruism is always prudent or easy to implement. To be effective, each requires a problematic accommodation on the part of others.

The Machiavellian analysis, however, ends up depicting the actor as more socially oriented than is revealed in economic and even much sociological analysis. The relentless pursuit of status forces the actor to be *acutely sensitive to the setting* where status is conferred. The "undersocialized" actors of economics and "oversocialized" actors of sociology isolate themselves through private choices or internalized norms (Granovetter 1985). In the present analysis, the key challenge is to erect a setting through actions and not reduce it to a choice or a scripted performance. The process is closely monitored for role opportunities. The actor must

[9] The standard interpretation that links alternation with trust and simultaneous exchange with a lack of trust is almost reversed here. Simultaneous exchange requires a good deal of trust in a global framework (i.e., market, role structure) that determines value for each side. A global framework that makes simultaneous exchange possible generally makes timing less important in exchange than at the local level.

[10] Here exchange theorists err in using economic imagery for social exchange (Blau 1964). It is meaningless to assign precise value to actions when roles are up for grabs and actors are deferring valuations. Valuation can occur only when actions are linked to roles. Yet here the complementarities that link roles produce values inequalities between the actors.

[11] Rational choice theorists leave the sources of utility open for the actor to determine. The motivation for the utility-maximizing behavior then becomes unproblematic. In practice, this apparent deference to the actor gives way to imputing utility and disutility and requires the actor to behave only "as if" utility were being maximized. The more private utility is, the more flexibility the theorist has to rationalize behavior. This flexibility is lost when status pursuit replaces utility maximization.

think in terms of social opportunities and constraints, not private utility or internalized norms, and should not trust any advice until it is converted into social terms.

The importance of setting is underscored by the ability of the actor to only sustain, but not advantageously manipulate, it. Role behavior reinforces roles. Local action sustains role ambiguity. The ideals for status pursuit do more to conserve status distributions than alter them, and much status instability can be explained by a failure to pursue an appropriate ideal. The Machiavellian analysis melds into a functionalism as "micro" action ideals and "macro" setting properties become cross referencing. We could have found the action ideals by asking what type of action is needed to sustain the two distinct settings. This functionalist starting point does not conflict with actor concerns. The actor depends on setting for the promise or prospect of status and cannot ignore the impact of action on setting in pursuing status (See Biggart and Hamilton 1984). There is no intervening private sphere where tension can arise between action and setting.[12]

The conservation property is essential for an ideal to be salient. Any ideal that destroyed its setting would not be visible enough to gain recognition.[13] Actors erect the setting in pursuing salient ideals. They are social concerns and instruments for the way actors view others. Violating a norm matters. Claiming status that is not conferred is a noteworthy event. Success and failure are visible processes that cannot be concealed. Reputations develop around differential abilities to use the salient ideals. Role behavior and local action are not easy ideals for actors to master, and variation in mastering them does much to sustain their salience.

This notion of salient ideals eliminates the schism between normative and positive social science. The ideal aspect is amenable to analysis. If the ideal is salient, the fact that many actors fall short of the ideal should be more of a problem for the actor than the analyst. This normative orientation is, however, constrained by the need for empirical support that the ideal is indeed salient. *The most successful actors must come the closest to realizing the ideal.* It matters little how much action the ideals can explain, only the ordering implied by the ideal must be salient in the setting. Random samples combined with explained variance criteria threaten to bury salient ideals in a heap of lesser efforts.

Recognizing two salient ideals has some additional advantages. As monolithic ideals often used to separate sociology from economics, both role behavior and rational action suffer from being stretched too much. "Generalized" role behavior that is detached from specific roles illustrates how role behavior can be rendered meaningless. Likewise, utility functions can be manipulated *ex post* to rationalize any behavior. Two salient ideals serve to delimit each other's range of applicability. Actors no longer have to make choices or use norms to avoid choices where the "givens" for these activities are not established. Our ability to pretend "as if" choices were made or norms followed only illustrates the dangerous flexibility of monolithic ideals. Local action, if anything, should

[12] This statement holds only with respect to ideal behavior. There are countless ways that tension can arise between action and setting. Actors can have value sources outside of status or protruding personalities that interfere with ideal behavior. These impediments function to make the ideal more socially salient because impediments have social consequences that inform others what to avoid.

[13] Game theory pursues an ideal that would destroy its setting: a maximizing strategy that prefixes a response to each possible response of an opponent. If these maximizing strategies can be found, there is no need to play out the game. Not reflected in observed action, the ideal could not be socially salient (though it might explain much action that is never taken). Even with a motivation to implement, however, the privacy of utility maximization makes it hard for actors to recognize others who are falling short of the ideal. Although actors can have a keen sense of failings in role behavior or local action and would resist any attempt to idealize these failings, they cannot sense failings in the utility maximization of others so easily and may unwarily idealize these failings. The salience problem has plagued rational choice theorists who have no clear stopping point for rationalizing behavior. Getting married and divorced, committing crimes, smoking, revolting, voting, dropping out of school, and stereotyping are all rational actions according to some theorists (Becker 1977, 1981; Gauthier 1986). It is not clear who will applaud socially undistinguished actors when their actions have been shown to be rational.

allow us to take role behavior (or rational action) much more seriously.

The existence of two salient ideals leads us to expect behavioral discontinuities as shifts in setting prompt shifts in the appropriate ideal. Leifer (1988) has confirmed these discontinuities in tournament chess interaction. Expert players were the best at sustaining involvement, in streams of sustained decision and local actions that maintained positional balance, but also the best at terminating involvement, in rational choices that exploited positional imbalance. No behavioral discontinuity was exhibited among lesser players who relied on rational choices everywhere. Lesser players, lacking a capacity for local action, did not experience balance. As a consequence of their tight control over action, these players lost control over game outcomes. Among their own kind, there was more positional instability and fewer draws than in games between experts. In settings where independent measures of balance are not available, behavioral discontinuity itself can indicate the boundary between balance and imbalance. A major problem with social exchange theory is that it has heretofore lacked a way to operationalize balance.

EXTENSIONS

The central problem that lingers in the present analysis is to explain why settings vary in the status differentiation they produce. If it is true that actors relentlessly pursue status and stand ready to exploit any opportunity, why do some settings afford more opportunity than others? Must we reject our assumptions about the actor to explain, for example, the lack of status differentiation in modern forms of friendship and marriage? Our focus on the dyad has shut out these concerns. To address them, we must look to various publics that play a part in interpreting actions and locking actors into roles. Publics must ultimately tip the balance between competing role interpretations and provide pressure for role consensus.

We can think of publics that stand "above" interaction settings and induce roles through their insistence and vigilance on interpreting role activity. These appear in corporate career systems (Rosenbaum 1984), educational tracking systems, league sports competition (Leifer 1988), and other arenas where publics insist on finding inequality among equals. Accommodation between interactants in avoiding differentiation can be disrupted by publics that eagerly grab for evidence of winning and losing and too eagerly support the claims of one side.

On the other hand, we can think of enshrouded arenas of elites where many underlings struggle to interpret what is going on (White 1985). Perpetual local action among elites might be essential to keep up the morale and energy of subordinates who are charged with getting things done (see studies of top management by Davis and Lawrence 1977; Vancil 1979; Burgelman 1983; Leifer and White 1986). Any sign of status differentiation among contending elites immobilizes the entourages of elites who fare poorly (Foltz 1977). But the deference of these publics keeps them from actively interfering in elite accommodations, which lends stability to these lofty arenas.

One might also consider interaction sets that are shielded from public view. Friendship relations in modern societies often stand outside the nexus of major institutions (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). In contrast to traditional marriage, Shorter (1977) has also emphasized the relative privacy in modern marriage. The absence of publics that press for differentiation may help account for the obsession for "equality" in these relationships, as well as their instability that arises from an inability to lock into unequal roles. Rather than drop status-seeking premises for such intimate relations, we need to understand better the settings that induce extreme forms of politeness.

Local action appears in and helps sustain pockets of role ambiguity that form within larger role structures. These pockets occur in different places and serve different functions within role structures, as suggested above. Because of the careful engineering needed to create these pockets where similar actors are brought together in processes that could differentiate them, the pockets should be viewed as a necessary component of role structures. The most important meeting grounds in the life course are carefully screened and staged encounters in which actors come face to face with others like themselves. Their place in other settings becomes irrelevant as they face similar others and struggle for coveted roles among themselves. Both the resolution and the struggle itself are crucial for filling positions and

keeping others active in the larger role structure.

Like a multiple-tiered fountain, there is an incessant falling off and rising up that is shaped as much by what is going on in levels beneath and above as by the dynamics within the level under focus. This paper has focused only on ideals for action within tiers and not on the structure of the fountain. Within this narrow focus, actors at best can only have a limited sense of what *could* happen to them. Within a tier, they could fall off or be sucked up and jockey with local action to be in position for the latter. But this is all they can do. When the moment of rising or falling comes, they are confronted with a force that extends beyond themselves. The action ideals only take us to the threshold of this next subject of inquiry. They take us to the limits of agency, or what action can and cannot accomplish.

REFERENCES

Abolafia, Mitchel Y. 1985. "Structured Anarchy: Formal Organization in the Commidity Futures Markets." In *The Social Dynamics of Financial Markets*, edited by P. Adler and P. Adler. JAI Press.

Baker, Wayne. 1984. "The Social Structure of a National Securities Market." *American Journal of Sociology* 89(4):775–811.

Becker, Gary S. 1976. *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1981. *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Biggart, Nicole and Gary Hamilton. 1984. "The Power of Obedience." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29:540–49.

Blau, Peter M. 1964. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York: Wiley.

———. 1977. *Inequality and Heterogeneity: A Primitive Theory*. New York: Free Press.

Boudon, Raymond. 1981. *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*. New York: Free Press.

Burgelman, R.A. 1983. "Corporate Entrepreneurship and Strategic Management: Insights from a Process Study." *Management Science* 29:1349–64.

Clausewitz, Carl von. [1826] 1976. *On War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Collins, Randall. 1981. "On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 86(5):984–1014.

Davis, Stanley and Paul Lawrence. 1977. *Matrix*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Eisenstadt, S.N. and L. Roniger. 1984. *Patrons, Clients, and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ekeh, Peter. 1974. *Social Exchange Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Elias, Norbert. [1936] 1982. *Power and Civility*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Emerson, Richard. 1962. "Power-Dependence Relations." *American Sociological Review* 27:31–40.

Foltz, William. 1977. "Social Structure and Political Behavior of Senegalese Elites," in Schmidt et al., *Friends, Followers, and Factions*.

Foster, George. 1977. "The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village." In *Friends, Followers, and Factions*, Schmidt et al.

Galaskiewicz, Joseph. 1985. *Social Organization of an Urban Grants Economy: A Study of Business Philanthropy and Nonprofit Organizations*. Orlando: Academic Press.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gauthier, David. 1986. *Morals by Agreement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual*. Chicago: Aldine.

Goode, William J. 1978. *Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Social Control System*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gouldner, Alvin. 1960. "The Norm of Reciprocity." *American Sociological Review* 25:161–78.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness." *American Journal of Sociology* 91:481–510.

Heritage, John. 1984. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hirschleifer, Jack. 1985. "The Expanding Domain of Economics." *American Economic Review* 75:53–68.

Knotterus, J. David. 1987. "Status Attainment Research and Its Image of Society." *American Sociological Review* 52:113–21.

Leifer, Eric M. 1988. "Trails of Involvement: Evidence for Local Games." *Sociological Forum* 3(4).

———. Unpublished. "Embeddedness Effects: The Origin of Performance Inequalities in League Sports." Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Leifer, Eric M. and Harrison C. White. 1986. "Wheeling and Annealing: Control in Federal and Multidivisional Systems." In *The Social Fabric: Dimensions and Issues*, edited by James F. Short, Jr. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

———. 1987. "A Structural Approach to Markets." In *Intercorporate Relations: The*

Structural Analysis of Business, edited by M. Mizruchi and M. Schwartz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Markham, Jesse W. and Paul V. Teplitz. 1981. *Baseball Economics and Public Policy*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Parsons, Talcott. 1966. *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: Free Press.

Parsons, Talcott and Edward Shils. 1952. *Toward and General Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

———et al. 1961. *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*. New York: Free Press.

Rae, Douglass. 1981. *Equalities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rosenbaum, James E. 1984. *Career Mobility in a Corporate Hierarchy*. New York: Academic Press.

Schmidt, Steffen W., Laura Guasti, Carl H. Lande, and James C. Scott. 1977. *Friends, Followers, and Factions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schotter, A. 1981. *The Economic Theory of Social Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schwartz, Barry. 1983. "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership." *American Sociological Review* 48:18–33.

Scott, J.F. 1971. *Internalization of Norms*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Shorter, Edward. 1977. *The Making of the Modern Family*. New York: Basic Books.

Shubik, Martin. 1982. *Game Theory in the Social Sciences: Concepts and Solutions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Simon, Herbert A. 1957. *Models of Man: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting*. New York: Wiley.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51:273–86.

Turner, Jonathan H. 1974. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey.

Vancil, Richard F. 1979. *Decentralization: Managerial Ambiguity by Design*. Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin.

Waller, Willard. 1937. "The Rating and Dating Complex." *American Sociological Review* 2:727–34.

Walzer, Michael. 1977. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. New York: Basic Books.

White, Harrison C. 1981. "Where Do Markets Come From." *American Journal of Sociology* 87:517–47.

———. 1985. "Agency as Control." In *Principals and Agents: The Structure of Business*, edited by J. Pratt and R. Zechhauser. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press.