

## 10 | Joint commitment

Kindness, n. A brief preface to ten volumes of exaction.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Autonomous actions are things that individuals have to be willing and able to do, but joint actions take the commitment of *all* the participants. I may be willing and able to ask a stranger on the street for his name, but he may be unwilling to tell me. I may be willing and able to ask him how to find City Hall, but he may be *unable* to tell me. When I propose these joint projects, I am committing myself, but that doesn't mean the stranger will commit himself too. Recall that joint projects require joint purposes, which have four conditions (Chapter 7):

For A and B to commit themselves to joint purpose *r*:

1. *Identification.* A and B must identify *r*
2. *Ability.* It must be possible for A and B to do their parts in fulfilling *r*
3. *Willingness.* A and B must be willing to do their parts in fulfilling *r*
4. *Mutual belief.* A and B must each believe that 1, 2, 3, and 4 are part of their common ground

It is one thing to propose a joint project and quite another to establish a joint commitment to it.

This chapter is about reaching joint commitments in the transfer of goods, as in a request and its compliance. Reaching such a commitment isn't merely a matter of getting the mechanics right—establishing what is expected of whom and when. Transferring goods is a social process that requires the management of the participants' feelings, emotions, and identities. It is shaped by some of the most intimate features of social life.

### Equity and face

People engaged in joint activities create what George Herbert Mead (1934) called *social objects*. When I bought a bottle of shampoo at the

drugstore (see Chapter 2), the clerk and I construed it not just as shampoo, but as property, first the drug store's and then mine. In the course of our transaction, we took other social objects for granted as well (the drugstore, the value of money, our roles as clerk and customer), and through our joint actions, we created still others (the price of the goods, the sale, the transfer of money). A twenty-dollar bill, Searle (1969) once observed, is merely a rectangular bit of paper with green, red, and black ink on it: This is a *brute fact* about the bill. But it also has the value of twenty-dollars within a monetary system: This is an *institutional fact*. Brute objects become social objects by virtue of social institutions. Social objects are what people jointly construe them to be, nothing more and nothing less. They are both presupposed and created in every joint activity.

One type of social object is the *social situation* itself, the set of conditions in which particular joint activities are carried out. It has long been noted that people compare what they put into a social situation with what they get out of it – their perceived costs and benefits. In many situations they aim for equity. When the drugstore clerk gives me shampoo, she bears a cost and I gain a benefit. To restore equity, I give her money so that I bear a balancing cost and she gains a balancing benefit.

Balancing costs and benefits lies at the foundation of a family of influential social theories. Two members of this family are the theories of *reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960) and *social exchange theory* (Homans, 1950, 1958), which have been well established in empirical research (see, e.g., Cialdini, 1993). Another member of this family is *equity theory* as described by Elaine Walster and her colleagues (Walster, Berscheid, and Walster, 1976; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1978). It is this theory I will use as a basis for the joint project of transferring goods.

#### EQUITY

The basic assumption of equity theory is that people in social situations try to maximize their outcomes – their benefits minus their costs. But if everyone were utterly selfish without restraint, the result would be social chaos and everyone would suffer. So social groups have evolved systems for apportioning costs and benefits equitably and for penalizing members who don't adhere to these systems. There is the market system for exchanging money for goods; there is the system of justice in which wrongdoers pay for their crimes; there is a system of employment in which employers pay employees for their labor.

For us, the crucial point of equity theory is that when people find themselves in inequitable situations, they feel distress, and the more inequitable the situation, the more distress they feel. To eliminate this distress they are motivated to restore equity. This has a range of well-documented consequences. Let us look at the two primary cases of inequity, one resulting from beneficial acts and the other from harmful acts. How, then, is equity restored?

*Dealing with benefits.* Suppose Alan and Barbara – A and B – begin in a state of equity, but then A benefits B by doing act  $k$ . A might give or loan B money, give B information, or do some other favor. This generally places B under an obligation to benefit A in equal measure. B should return money or goods to A, give A equally valuable information, or the like. Consider the ways A can restore equity. He can hold B under an obligation to do something in return; this is a common technique for exploiting people – doing them a favor to make them obligated. If A recognizes that B can never make the repayment, he can do other things. He can belittle the value of act  $k$ , saying it wasn't worth much anyway. Or he can use the occasion to humiliate B, to show his moral or social superiority over B.

What B does in response to A's benefit is motivated in part by A's techniques for restoration. The simplest response is to reciprocate the benefit, as when I pay the clerk for the shampoo. So B is more likely to accept a gift she can reciprocate than one she cannot. B apparently realizes how discomfiting it is to be left with an unfulfillable obligation, how it can be used to exploit or humiliate her. Even when B accepts a benefit she cannot reciprocate, she has several ways out. She too can belittle A's act  $k$ , saying it didn't cost A much. Or she can deny that A and B were in equity before A's beneficial act, and that it was owed to her.

*Dealing with costs.* Suppose instead that A and B begin in a state of equity, but then A costs or harms B by doing act  $k$ . A might step on B's foot, take B's money, or otherwise exploit her. Here A can restore equity in several ways. He can compensate B for the costs of act  $k$ . He can punish himself, placing equal costs on himself. He can minimize B's suffering, convincing himself that what he did was actually equitable. He can blame or derogate B, saying she deserved the harm she incurred. He can even deny having done  $k$ . Finally, he can apologize to B. As Walster and her colleagues note, apologies can restore equity in several different ways. They may restore actual equity by humbling A and exalting B. They may explain how much A has already suffered, and so equity has

already been restored. They may be attempts to convince B that A's act was justified. Or they may be attempts to convince B to forgive A since there is no other way to restore equity. In brief, Walster and her colleagues conclude, "exploiters tend to use either justification techniques or compensation techniques to restore equity" (1978, p. 35).

As the harmed or exploited party, B also has techniques for restoring equity. Victims, it has been found, are especially motivated to right inequities. B can demand compensation – a benefit to match the cost. B can retaliate, returning the cost to A. When impotent to do either of these, B can justify the inequity other ways. Victims of an injustice, for example, sometimes convince themselves that the exploiter deserved the benefits he got, or that they deserved the harm that was done to them. B can also devalue A's act – it wasn't really as costly as it appeared.

The thrust of equity theory, in brief, is that A and B try to maintain equity, and empirical evidence shows that they will go to extraordinary lengths to do that. Assume that A causes an inequity with B by doing  $k$ . The techniques they have for restoring equity fall into three basic types:

1. *Compensation.* A and B can perform acts to equalize the costs and benefits of  $k$ .
2. *Reevaluation.* A and B can change the perceived value of  $k$ .
3. *Redefining the situation.* A and B can redefine the situation to make  $k$  equitable.

#### FACE

Equity theory rests on the assumption that people try to avoid the distress they feel in inequitable situations. But why should they feel distress? One answer can be found in Erving Goffman's (1967) analysis of the folk notion of *face*. In Goffman's view, face is the positive image, or respect, that one claims for oneself in the *line* of actions one takes with others in an encounter. People can maintain, gain, or lose face in such encounters, but any change in face arouses emotion. When Alan is talking to Barbara, he can feel confident and assured as long as he maintains face. But if he loses face, he may feel ashamed, embarrassed, or chagrined, and if he thought Barbara was to blame, he may feel angry at her. We each exhibit a certain self-respect in dealing with others. Whenever it is enhanced or undermined, we react immediately with positive or negative emotions, and these emotions are something we try to manage.

Face, in Goffman's view, is a social object. It is determined not only by its owner, but by the others in an encounter – it is jointly determined.

In an encounter between Alan and Barbara, Alan is expected to exhibit self-respect, but also to be considerate of Barbara; the same goes for her. They are “expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification” (p. 11) with each other and their feelings; if they didn’t, they would be considered heartless and unfeeling, to be acting without shame.

The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants. (p. 11)

That takes cooperation. One result is that Alan and Barbara tend to mutually accept the lines of actions they each have chosen. As Goffman argued, “Ordinarily, maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective” (p. 12).

In social encounters, the participants are expected to act with *deference* toward each other – to display their appreciation of each other to each other. According to Goffman, they rely on two broad strategies. The first he called *presentation rituals* “through which the actor concretely depicts his appreciation of the recipient” (p. 73). Alan, for example, may provide Barbara with salutations, invitations, compliments, or other minor services. The second type of strategy Goffman called *avoidance rituals*, “taking the form of proscriptions, interdictions, and taboos, which imply acts the actor must refrain from doing lest he violate the right of the recipient to keep him at a distance” (p. 73). Alan will try to avoid interfering with Barbara’s normal activities or invading her privacy. Presentation rituals are designed to maintain the partners’ feelings of *self-worth*, and avoidance rituals, their feelings of *autonomy*, or freedom of action. These two sides of a person’s face, self-worth and autonomy, have sometimes been called *positive* and *negative face*.

In using language, people are therefore motivated to maintain their own and their partner’s face. That is the basis for Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s (1987) analysis of politeness. Following Goffman, they have pointed out that some speech acts tend to affect self-worth, and others tend to affect autonomy – either the speaker’s or the addressee’s. Suppose Alan is speaking to Barbara, making A the speaker and B the addressee:

1. *Acts that lower B’s self-worth.* A may show disapproval or disrespect for B by his actions. These include criticism, contempt, and ridicule; disagreements and challenges; and raising embarrassing topics.

2. *Acts that lower B's autonomy.* A may reduce B's freedom of action in many ways. These include requests, orders, suggestions, and warnings, since A is getting B to do something, and that will restrict her actions.
3. *Acts that lower A's self-worth.* Any action by A may lead to a lowering of his own self-worth, as when he apologizes, accepts criticisms, or admits responsibility for actions that are disapproved of.
4. *Acts that lower A's autonomy.* When A makes promises, expresses thanks, or accepts offers, apologies, or thanks, he is limiting his own future course of action, reducing his autonomy.

Any particular action by A toward B may affect both A's and B's face.

Goffman's proposals about face really constitute a type of equity theory. The steps people take in displaying deference, maintaining demeanor, and dealing with loss of face are almost identical to the strategies I outlined earlier for maintaining and restoring equity. Indeed, Goffman often spoke of reciprocity, balance, mutuality, and compensative effort in discussing these strategies. Clearly, equity and face are on intimate terms.

#### THE EQUITY PRINCIPLE

Every joint project raises issues of equity and face. The point can be illustrated in the following exchange (1.9.36):

Alan: Manzanilla?  
 Barbara: yes please, that'd be lovely

Here Alan offers Barbara some Manzanilla sherry, and she accepts. When Alan proposes the offer, he puts his face at risk. What if she takes the sherry without adequate recompense? And when Barbara takes up his proposal, she puts her own face at risk. What if she cannot repay him for the favor? Promises, threats, requests, apologies, assertions—all these create costs and benefits that the participants must attend to.

Many of these costs and benefits come from Alan's and Barbara's commitments to each other. Note that simple commitments vary in degree. Alan's commitment to reading *War and Peace* may range from strong to weak, influencing what he does about reading it. When there are two people involved, commitments also vary in form, as in this series:

1. A commits himself to doing *k*.
2. A commits himself *in front of B* to doing *k*.
3. A commits himself *to B* to doing *k*.
4. A commits himself *to B* to *doing his part of k*, a joint action by A and B.

Suppose Alan commits himself to quitting smoking, but then reneges. If his commitment was private, as in 1, he may be disappointed, but he won't suffer any loss of face to Barbara, who may know nothing about it. If he made the commitment in front of Barbara, as in 2, his failure should lead to loss of face – he is embarrassed for her to see he doesn't have the self-control to stop. If he made his commitment directly to Barbara, as in 3, a failure should lead to even greater loss of face because he fails not only himself but Barbara. *Participatory commitments*, as in 4, are the most demanding. If Alan and Barbara have promised each other to quit smoking so long as the other does too, Alan's failure will undermine not only his goal, but hers: He will be partly responsible for her continuing to smoke. Failure here should lead to the greatest loss of face. All joint projects require participatory commitments, and that is why equity and face are so important to them.

How do people maintain equity in completing joint projects? The hypothesis I wish to entertain is that they follow this principle:<sup>1</sup>

*The equity principle.* In proposing a joint project, speakers are expected to presuppose a method for maintaining equity with their addressees.

When Alan offers Barbara sherry, he takes for granted that they can reach an equitable outcome, and that Barbara will coordinate in reaching it. Indeed, Barbara goes beyond accepting Alan's offer with "yes." She defers to his autonomy with the concession "please" (meaning "if you like") and to his self-worth with the compliment "that'd be lovely." These gestures appear to be partial recompense for the benefits she receives at Alan's cost. Of course, not all joint projects are designed to maintain equity. If Alan wants to insult, put down, embarrass, or flatter Barbara, he will deliberately violate the equity principle. Although the equity principle applies to both equitable and inequitable joint projects, I will focus on the equitable ones.

People have a vast array of techniques for maintaining and restoring equity in using language. Many of these have been documented by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), who have argued that they are universal, or nearly universal, in languages of the world. But precisely how do these techniques work? For a full account, let us see how they arise in joint projects within larger social situations.

<sup>1</sup> Compare Goffman (1967): "Ordinarily, maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective" (p. 12).

### **Transfers of goods**

When Alan directs Barbara to do something, and she complies, they complete a joint project I will call a *transfer of (symbolic) goods*. Alan's directive may range from a hint to an order, and Barbara's compliance, from a tentative to a strong commitment. The result may be a question and answer, order and obedience, request and compliance, suggestion and uptake, or a more extended sequence. These procedures are important because they bring into focus all the problems we have noted for joint projects. It isn't that Alan merely issues a directive and then Barbara complies. The two of them (1) negotiate a joint purpose and (2) find a way of fulfilling it equitably. Both processes help determine the mutual construal of Alan's utterance and Barbara's response to it.

Most transfers of goods have the potential of creating inequities. All other things being equal, when Alan asks Barbara to stand up, and she stands up, they create an inequity. He has gained a benefit by having his desire fulfilled (he wanted her to stand up), and she has paid a cost by doing something she wouldn't otherwise have done (she stood up). These costs and benefits are linked. Alan intended his benefit to come at a cost to Barbara, and she intended her cost to benefit him. Potentially, he gains face, and she loses face. The issue is how to complete the transfer of goods and yet maintain equity, and that depends on the social situation. Let us first consider one end of a continuum of social situations – closed situations.

#### **ROUTINE PROCEDURES**

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein designed a primitive language that he described this way:

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block," "pillar," "slab," "beam." A calls them out; – B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language. (1958, p. 3)

A and B achieve a transfer of goods with what I will call a *routine procedure*, one that is almost entirely prescribed by the social situation. A simply calls out "Slab," and B brings one. How are routine procedures possible?

A and B's social situation is tightly circumscribed, fixed, or what I will call *closed*. In their roles as builder and assistant, A has the authority to order B to pass stones, and B has the duty to obey. Although Wittgenstein doesn't say, the situation presupposes a method of maintaining equity; for example, A may have contracted with B to do the work for pay. Further, A has no authority or ability to issue other orders. And in his role B is assumed capable of passing stones, and there are no physical barriers to his work. The situation is so tightly circumscribed that the only condition of their joint purpose left to establish is its *identity*, and that has two parts: (1) that A is now ordering B to pass a stone; and (2) which of the four types of stone A wants B to pass. A can achieve 1 by uttering any of the four words he knows. He can achieve 2 by the word he chooses. All of this, of course, is part of A and B's common ground.

Closed situations are defined by the *parameters* and *values* taken for granted in them. In this situation, A and B take it as common ground that there is one parameter (type of block) with four possible values (block, pillar, slab, beam), and A's utterance specifies the intended value. The joint project is completed by B's doing what is specified by the value of that parameter. The result is a highly routine procedure, a standard action-response pair – a completed joint project:

- A: Slab
- B: [brings a slab]

Other situations have more than one parameter each with its own possible values, but the result is still a routine procedure.

Life is full of closed situations with routine procedures. Here are a few examples:

Army	A sergeant on a parade field can yell out "March," "Left," "At ease," "Parade rest," and a private under his or her command will comply. The parameter is what the private is to do next, and the value is specified via a small class of phrases. Compare a ship captain's orders to the ship's crew, "Full speed ahead," "Hard astern," and "Bearing 20 degrees starboard."
Ticket booth	When customers approach the ticket window at a theater, they take it as common ground that the ticket seller is available for requests for tickets and little else. All they need to specify is the number and type of tickets, as in "Two adults and one child."
Surgery	During an operation, surgeons can issue one-word commands – "Scalpel," "Sponge," "Scissors" – and their assistant's job is to

hand them the right instrument. The parameter is the instrument wanted. Its value is specified by a bare noun.

- Bar** Some situations present more than one parameter, so speakers must specify the parameter as well as its value. With a bartender, customers could specify the drink wanted, "Two gin and tonics," or other information, "The men's room?" all with phrasal utterances.

In these situations, equity is taken for granted. In the army, a soldier's rights and duties are established institutionally. Sergeants have the right to order privates to do certain things, and privates have the duty to obey. For each permitted order, the sergeant and private don't need to deal further with equity – say, through mitigating devices such as "Would you mind standing at ease?" That has already been taken care of. The same goes for the ticket seller, surgeon, and bartender.

In other situations, equity is well defined, but the range of goods that can be transferred is greater. Examples:

- Classroom** Teachers have the right to ask many things of their students. Because the situation is closed, they can do so in routine ways: "Sit down, Alan"; "What is the capital of the Netherlands, Ned?"; "Class is dismissed." No extra negotiations are ordinarily needed.
- Restaurant** A waiter's job is to take customers' orders, so customers can do this simply: "A hamburger." All the waiter needs to know is the customer's wants or expectations, so we also find "I want a hamburger" or "I'll have a hamburger."
- Friends** Suppose Ned gets Julia to help him compute square roots. Once they have defined the situation, Ned can make his requests simply – "Give me the square root of 7" or "Now I need the square root of 7" or even "Seven" – and Julia will give the square root.

In closed situations, the participants know their roles, rights and duties, and potential joint purposes. All they need to establish is the joint purpose for that occasion. That they can do with a routine procedure. The first partner initiates the routine, often with a phrasal utterance, and the second partner completes it by complying.

#### REGULAR PROCEDURES

When the situation isn't so closed, the participants cannot rely on routine procedures. Suppose I ask Verona, an acquaintance, "Do you know

where Goldberg's Grocery is?" and she answers "Yes, it's around the corner." She and I have carried out something more than a routine procedure, yet we didn't create it from scratch. It is semi-routine, or what I will call a *regular procedure*. Many regular procedures have evolved for situations that are recurrent but not fully routine.

A transfer of goods, like any joint action, is subject to the principle of closure. When the transfer isn't routine, there are potential obstacles to its completion. I may want Verona to tell me where Goldberg's Grocery is, but she may not be able to, or want to, or be allowed to, or find it equitable to, or recognize that I want her to. That is, we may not be able to satisfy the identity, ability, and willingness conditions in establishing a joint purpose. To achieve the transfer, she and I must overcome any such obstacles. The general pattern consists of two tasks:

- I. A and B prepare for transfer of goods
- II. A and B make the transfer of the goods proper

Ordinarily, A and B deal with potential obstacles to a transfer of goods and then make the transfer.

So, many transfers of goods get accomplished in *extended* joint projects. Recall that extended joint projects are created in three basic ways – embedding, chaining, and pre-sequencing (Chapter 7) – and all three are exploited in extended transfers of goods. Here are four common patterns that emerge.

*Pattern 1. Preparation plus request.* In the simplest form of the general pattern, A and B carry out two minimal joint projects in a chain, as here (Merritt, 1976, p. 324):

Customer: Hi. Do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?  
 Server: Yes, sir.  
 Customer: I'll have four please.  
 Server: [turns to get]

In the first adjacency pair, C and S establish that S has the requisite batteries, a potential obstacle to C's getting S to sell him batteries. Only when they have completed the preparatory joint project do they turn to the transfer proper.

A and B should be opportunistic about completing their transfer and, all other things being equal, try to minimize their effort. So when C said, "Do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?" S might have tried to short-circuit the process by anticipating C's next move. That is the basis for the next three patterns.

*Pattern 2. Preparation plus offer.* When C initiates the preparatory joint project, he may also elicit an offer, as here (Merritt, 1976, p. 324):

- Customer: Do you have the pecan Danish today?  
 Server: Yes we do. Would you like one of those?  
 Customer: Yes, please.  
 Server: [turns to get]

In the first two turns, C and S establish that S has the requisite pecan Danish. But in turn two, S anticipates that he and C are likely to transfer goods and *offers* him a Danish (“Would you like one of those?”) before C requests one. S, in effect, construes C’s first turn as a pre-request and preempts the anticipated request with an offer.

Preparation-plus-offer is beneficial to C because he would rather S offer him goods in the second turn than request the same goods himself in turn three. This follows from the equity principle. It costs me less if you offer to lend me a book than if I ask you to lend it. Your offer shows you are willing and able, so that is no cost to overcome. When, instead, I request you to lend it, I don’t presuppose that you are willing and able, so I bear an additional cost. Questions like “Do you have the pecan Danish today?” are useful for turning potential requests from C into offers from S.

*Pattern 3. Condition plus request.* Often, A initiates a sequence in such a way that he or she is construed as making the request too – an elective construal. An example (Clark, 1979):

- Susan: Do you have a price on a fifth of Jim Beam?  
 Manager: Yes, I do. It’s five dollars and fifty-nine cents.

Here the manager construed Susan as intending her utterance to serve double duty. He took it both as a question, which he answered “Yes, I do,” and as a request, to which he responded “It’s \$5.59.” Note that he didn’t skip anything he would have done in the chain. He simply eliminated Susan’s second turn. Of 100 merchants faced with this pre-request, about 40 did answer “Yes.” The manager, in effect, construed Susan’s utterance as a *conditional* request, roughly, “Do you have a price for Jim Beam, and, if you do, what is it?” The condition is expressed in Susan’s pre-request, and the request proper is an elective construal.

*Pattern 4. Proforma condition plus request.* In many situations, A makes a pre-request that is to be taken as *pro forma*, as in this example (Clark, 1979):

- Susan: Can you tell me what time you close tonight?  
 Manager: Six o’clock.

Here, the manager doesn't take Susan's apparent question seriously at all. He construes Susan's utterance solely as a request for the closing time and responds "Six o'clock." Of thirty merchants presented with this pre-request, none answered the question before giving the closing time. It is irrelevant whether Susan intended her pre-request to be *pro forma* or not. What counts is that the manager takes it to be *pro forma*, and she accepts his construal.

These four patterns may also include embedded joint projects. Here, for example, is a condition plus request (pattern 3) with an embedded side sequence to deal with further preparatory conditions (Merritt, 1976, p. 325):

Customer: Do you have Marlboros?  
 Server: Yeah.  
 Server: Hard or soft pack?  
 Customer: Soft please.  
 Server: Okay. [turns to get]

S takes C's initial utterance as projecting two joint actions, a transfer of knowledge and a transfer of cigarettes. He makes both projects explicit. The embedded joint project ("Hard or soft pack?" "Soft please") is preparatory for completing the second. The next sequence is similar, but is an instance of *pro forma* condition plus request (pattern 4) (Merritt, 1976, p. 343):

Customer: Do you have Marlboros?  
 Server: Hard or soft pack?  
 Customer: Hard.  
 Server: [Turns to get]

Patterns 1 through 4 lie on a continuum. A and B's total effort is greatest in pattern 1 and least in pattern 4. On the other hand, B makes the weakest assumptions about A's request in pattern 1 and the strongest in pattern 4. For A and B to short-circuit the full process in pattern 1, it must be mutually obvious what A's next step is likely to be. For that B must be able to infer A's larger purpose.

#### LARGER PURPOSES

Whenever Alan broaches a new issue with Barbara, they take for granted he has some larger purpose as part of their overall joint activity. He didn't ask "Where do you live?" or "What time is it?" just to discover where she lives or what time it is. He did it because he wanted to mail her a

brochure or catch a bus. If they are ever to short-circuit their exchange – as in patterns 3 or 4 instead of 1 or 2 – they need to appeal to that larger purpose.

Speakers intend their larger purposes to be inferred from their utterances as construed in the current situation. This is nicely illustrated by the study, mentioned in Chapter 7, in which a woman named Susan telephoned 150 San Francisco area restaurants and asked the manager one of three questions (Clark, 1979):

- Question 1   Do you accept American Express cards?
- Question 2   Do you accept credit cards?
- Question 3   Do you accept any kinds of credit cards?

The managers could have given a simple “yes” or “no,” but that wasn’t their approach. They went on to infer Susan’s larger purpose.

“Why,” the managers asked themselves, “is this woman calling the restaurant now to ask if we accept American Express cards (or credit cards, or any kinds of credit cards)?” They could infer roughly this hierarchy of purposes (from general to specific):

1. She wants to decide whether or not to eat at the restaurant, probably that night.
2. She wants to decide how to pay for the meal.
3. She wants to know whether she can pay with a credit card.
4. She wants to know whether any of the credit cards that the restaurant accepts matches any of the cards she owns.

And, depending on her question, they could infer that her most specific purpose was one of these two:

- 5a. She wants to know whether the restaurant accepts American Express cards.
- 5b. She wants to know whether the restaurant accepts any credit cards.

They could go further. If she asked about “American Express cards” (question 1), she must own an American Express card and perhaps others. If she asked about “credit cards” (question 2), she probably owns all major credit cards – otherwise she would have been more specific. If she asked about “any kinds of credit cards” (question 3), she probably owns several but not all major credit cards – otherwise why mention “*kinds* of credit cards.”

Armed with these inferences, the managers should try short circuiting for some of Susan’s questions, and they did. Take the managers who

were able to say yes to her question. Those who were asked “Do you accept American Express cards?” should assume Susan had only the one card and wanted to know whether it was acceptable. They should answer simply, “Yes, we do,” as if they were initiating pattern 1, and they did:

<b>Caller's utterance</b>	<b>Manager's response</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Do you accept American Express cards?	1. Yes, we do	100

The managers who were asked “Do you accept credit cards?” might assume she had all major cards and respond “Yes” (pattern 1). But since she might not have all of them, they might give her their list of the acceptable credit cards too, “Yes, we accept Mastercard and Visa” (pattern 3). Here is what they did:

<b>Caller's utterance</b>	<b>Manager's response</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Do you accept credit cards?	1. Yes, we do	44
	3. Yes, we accept Mastercard and Visa	38
	4. We accept Mastercard and Visa	16

And the managers who were asked “Do you accept any kinds of credit cards?” should be fairly sure she needed a list of the acceptable credit cards (she probably didn’t own them all), so they should initiate pattern 3 or 4. Here are their responses:

<b>Caller's utterance</b>	<b>Manager's response</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Do you accept any kinds of credit cards?	1. Yes, we do	10
	3. Yes, we accept Mastercard and Visa	56
	4. We accept Mastercard and Visa	33

When managers were asked the follow-up question, “Do you accept any other credit cards?” almost all responded “We accept Mastercard and Visa,” initiating pattern 4. The managers initiated patterns 1, 3, and 4 depending on their inferences of Susan’s larger purposes.

Managers made the same inferences when they were not able to answer yes to Susan’s question. Many managers who were asked “Do you accept American Express cards?” initiated pattern 3 and answered “No, but we accept Mastercard and Visa,” anticipating a follow-up question about other credit cards. And many managers who were asked

“Credit cards?” or “Any kinds of credit cards?” moved further up the hierarchy of purposes and answered “No, we just take checks or cash.” Two managers even dealt with Susan’s most general purpose, her patronage at the restaurant. When asked “Do you accept credit cards?” one of them answered, “Uh, yes, we accept credit cards, but tonight we are closed.”

#### EXTENDED PROCEDURES

The joint projects that emerge in many open situations are even more extended. When there is too much that Alan and Barbara cannot take for granted, they must establish their roles, rights, and obligations as well as the means by which equity will be maintained.

Once again the issue is equity. If Alan wants Barbara to do something for him, the two of them must negotiate a joint purpose equitable to them both. Alan must identify not only what he wants Barbara to do for him, but also what he will do in return. As Dale Schunk and I found, more complicated transfers of goods regularly divide into these two parts:<sup>2</sup>

1. A's acquisition of goods from B
  - a. A's justification of the need for the goods
  - b. A's minimization of the cost of the goods
  - c. A's request of the goods proper
2. A's return of goods to B
  - a. A's future obligation of other goods.
  - b. Other benefits for B.

If Alan wants to borrow \$100 from Barbara, he might proceed this way: “Say, Barbara, I need \$175 to pay the mechanic for fixing my car, and I have only \$75 [a justification]. Could you lend me \$100? [the request proper]. I'll pay you back in the morning [future obligation].” In sequences like this, acquisition almost always comes before return of goods, as it should. If I were to make a request of Verona, she would need to know what goods she was to deliver before she could evaluate the goods I was committing in return.

If such a transfer of goods is subject to equity, it should include equalizing devices of the expected types, and it does. A should try to define the situation as one in which one or more of these conditions hold:

<sup>2</sup> D. H. Schunk and H. H. Clark, 1984, unpublished research.

1. *Justification.* It is reasonable for B to do the act for A. Examples: "I really need the money," "I can't get to the bank," and "You still owe me \$5, don't you?"
2. *Minimization of request.* The act B is to do is not very costly. Hence: "I'm not really asking for much," "It's not out of your way," and "You don't have to do it right away."
3. *Future obligation.* A intends to do something in return, as made explicit in "I'll pay you back," "I'll remember this," and "I'll return the favor."
4. *Maximization of B's benefit.* B will benefit from doing the act, as expressed in "You'll enjoy it" and "It'll do you good."

These devices each regularly occur in open transfers of goods.

Which devices are needed depends on the situation. Large requests threaten to cost B dearly, and indeed they lead to more justifications, minimizations, obligations, and benefits than small requests (see also Brown and Levinson, 1987). I don't need to justify asking Verona for the time, but I may need to justify asking her for money or for the loan of her car. Also, requests among friends tend to be repaid in kind—real goods for real goods, favors by favors. I wouldn't pay Verona to mail a letter, or try to convince her that mailing the letter will do her good. There are strong social constraints on how one person's acts are to be justified and compensated for.

The social situation in which people carry out a joint activity is all-important. Closed situations allow routine procedures; less circumscribed situations allow regular procedures; and even less circumscribed situations may require extended procedures. In open situations, the participants have a great many options. The procedure they develop depends on the situation as they construe it—especially the larger purposes they take for granted and the equity they need to maintain.

### Framing situations

In proposing a transfer of goods, speakers often frame the situation in which the joint project is to be carried out. When I asked Verona "Do you know where Goldberg's Grocery is?" I framed a miniature social situation with two highlighted components:

1. I wasn't certain whether she knew where Goldberg's Grocery was; and
2. I wanted to know where Goldberg's Grocery was.

Component 2 would belong to any procedure I would use for that request, but I had a choice with component 1. I could have framed the situation as one in which she wasn't allowed to tell me, or hadn't heard of Goldberg's Grocery, or was in a hurry, or many other things. People

initiating a regular procedure have options about the situation to frame, and take that option in their choice of pre-request.

#### TYPES OF PRE-REQUESTS

For a transfer of goods, there are many potential obstacles to negotiating a joint purpose everyone can agree on. These obstacles follow from the four requirements on any joint purpose – identification, ability, willingness, and mutual belief – but take a special form in the transfer of goods:<sup>3</sup>

- |                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. Identification           | B is to do <i>k</i> for A.                                     |
| 2. Ability                  | <i>K</i> is a future act of B for A.                           |
| a. A's future act           | It is physically possible for B to do <i>k</i> for A           |
| b. B's physical possibility | B is competent to do <i>k</i> for A.                           |
| c. B's competence           |  |
| 3. Willingness              | A wants B to do <i>k</i> for A.                                |
| a. A's desire               | B intends to do <i>k</i> for A.                                |
| b. B's intention            | A and B recognize the consequences on                          |
| c. A and B's equity         | equity of B's doing <i>k</i> for A.                            |
| 4. Mutual belief            | Conditions 1 through 4 are part of A and<br>B's common ground. |

If A uses his pre-requests to frame the situation, and if he must frame it to overcome potential obstacles, then he should design pre-requests that deal with identification, ability, and willingness in the transfer of goods. And this is what people do (e.g., Ervin-Tripp, 1976, 1981; Gordon and Lakoff, 1971; Searle, 1975b).

Whatever else A and B do, they must identify the joint purpose they are committing themselves to – the transfer of certain goods. In many pre-requests, the goods to be transferred are mentioned explicitly, as in the italicized portions of these pre-requests:

- Do you have *the pecan Danish* today?  
 Can you tell me *what time you close tonight*?  
 Could you possibly *shut the door*?  
 May I ask *who's coming to the party tonight*?

<sup>3</sup> These conditions are related to Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) felicity conditions, and Bach and Harnish's (1979) success conditions, on requests, but go beyond them in several ways. The point is that these conditions derive from general requirements for any joint purpose.

In other pre-requests, they have to be inferred from A's utterance as construed in the current situation, as here:

This soup needs salt. [B is to pass the salt.]  
 Don't you think the room is a little warm. [B is to open a window.]  
 Benny, the door's open. [B is to close the door.]  
 Waiter, there is a fly in my soup. [B is to replace soup.]

Depending on the situation and utterance, what B is to do could be almost anything.

What B is to do for A must also be (1) a future act, (2) physically possible, and (3) within B's competence. Many pre-requests check on these obstacles:

B's future act	Students are to bring number 2 pencils to the exam.
B's possibility	Do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?
	The door is open for you now.
	Isn't the water for the coffee boiling?
	Can you reach the salt?
B's competence	You can be a little more quiet now.
	Did you happen to see in the newspaper when the concert is tonight?

And there are many more types.

Finally, there are conditions on A's and B's willingness to commit to a transfer of goods. It requires (1) A to want B to take an action, (2) B to intend to do it, and (3) A and B to recognize the equity of B's doing it. Pre-requests are often designed to address these obstacles:

A's desire	I want you to leave right now. I'd like to hear what happened the other day at the office.
B's intention	Will you tell me where Ken is? Do you want to pour me a cup of coffee? Would you mind holding this for me a second? You are allowed to go in now.
A and B's equity	I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that. It'd be a great help if you read to Benny for a while.

Many other pre-requests fall into these categories.

The situations framed by these pre-requests differ in equity. By equity theory, whenever the situation, as A frames it, increases B's self-worth or autonomy, A should be judged polite. Whenever it lowers either one, A should be judged less polite. There is good evidence for these predic-

tions (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Clark and Schunk 1980; Lakoff, 1973, 1977).

B's autonomy, or freedom of action, tends to be restricted by transfers of goods, since B is being asked to do something she wouldn't otherwise do. Pre-requests that are polite generally give back some of this autonomy: They give B the option of not complying, or a legitimate excuse if he takes that option. In the situation framed by "Do you know who's coming tonight?" B isn't necessarily expected to have the information and is being offered the chance to say she doesn't. She is being offered a legitimate reason *not* to agree to the transfer of goods. Questions tend to make pre-requests polite because they give, or appear to give, B some autonomy about complying. And that makes pre-requests such as "I want you to hand me the knife" or "I'd like you to hand me the knife" less polite.

B's self-worth should also go up with some pre-requests and down with others. With "May I ask you where Jordan Hall is?" the situation that A frames is one in which A is so subordinate to B that he has to ask B's permission even to make a request. With "Shouldn't you tell me where Jordan Hall is?" in contrast, the situation framed is one in which A can remind B of her obligations and hold her to them. B's self-worth is raised in the first situation but lowered in the second. By equity theory, the first pre-request should be judged more polite than the second, and it is. There are many ways that B's self-worth can be raised or lowered, and each affects politeness.

These examples give us only a glimpse at the obstacles A and B may prepare for in a transfer of goods. The point is that most pre-requests frame a situation with two joint projects: a preparatory one and, if that succeeds, the transfer of goods proper. It is this property that often allows for an opportunistic short-circuiting of the process.

#### GREATEST OBSTACLES

What situation should people frame for an effective transfer of goods? With so many potential obstacles, they need a strategy, and the opportunistic strategy would be to check on the most likely obstacles first – all else being equal. That is the same strategy I would use in fixing a computer program that wouldn't run, or a car that wouldn't start. The principle is this:

*Principle of greatest obstacle.* All else being equal, two people trying to establish a joint purpose will try first to overcome the greatest, or most likely, obstacle to reaching it.

The obstacle principle should apply to any joint purpose. Let us see how it applies to the transfer of goods.

Suppose Alan wants to know the time of a lecture announced that morning in the newspaper and thinks his friend Barbara would be perfectly willing to tell him if only she had seen the announcement. He should judge this to be the greatest potential obstacle and frame the situation around it: “Did you happen to read in the newspaper this morning what time the governor’s lecture is today?” If he were to say, instead, “*Do you want to tell me* what time the governor’s lecture is today?” he would have framed a situation in which Barbara surely knows the time but may be unwilling to tell him, and this would go against his assumptions.

By framing the situation he does, he accomplishes several things. First, he helps Barbara overcome the greatest obstacle. In effect, he tells her how to find the information he wants – by recalling what she had read in the morning newspaper. Second, he helps retain equity. By helping Barbara find the right information, he makes it easier for her to comply. He also gives her a face-saving way out if she doesn’t know the information. All she need do is say, “Sorry, I didn’t see the paper,” a justification Alan indicates is perfectly reasonable. The optimal pre-request not only overcomes the greatest potential obstacle to compliance, but also helps maintain equity if it is impossible to comply.

People appear to follow this principle (Francik and Clark, 1985; Gibbs, 1986b). In several experiments, people were placed, or were asked to imagine themselves, in a variety of situations and asked to make requests. When there were no obvious potential obstacles, they tended to use simple requests or questions, like “What time is the governor’s lecture tonight?” When there were obstacles, their requests tended to be directed at the greatest obstacle – whether it was B’s potential ignorance, inability, unwillingness, or lack of memory.

Pre-requests vary in how *specific* they are in identifying an obstacle. Alan could have asked Barbara any one of these questions:

1. **Can you tell me when the governor’s lecture is?**
2. **Do you know when the governor’s lecture is?**
3. **Do you happen to know when the governor’s lecture is?**
4. **Did you happen to see when the governor’s lecture is?**
5. **Did you happen to read in the newspaper this morning when the governor’s lecture is?**

These are ordered from general to specific. To answer yes to question 5 is to entail yes to questions 1 through 4, but not vice versa.

Which pre-request should Alan use? By the greatest obstacle principle, he should be as specific as reasonable. Question 1 wouldn't pinpoint the potential obstacle as precisely as 5 would: It wouldn't help Barbara find the wanted information nor would it give her a convincing excuse if she didn't have it. Yet it isn't always advisable to be specific. If Alan were trying to find out how much weight Barbara had gained, the greatest potential obstacle might be Barbara's being too embarrassed to say. To identify this obstacle publicly ("Would you be too embarrassed to say how much weight you have gained?") could be very threatening indeed, so it might be better to hint obliquely at the obstacle, as with "People often gain a bit of weight when they turn forty – has that been a problem with you?" People appear to follow this advice (Francik and Clark, 1985; Gibbs, 1986b).

So it isn't the pre-request itself that is effective or ineffective, equitable or inequitable. It is the situation that the speaker frames with it. Pre-requests are chosen for the situations they help create.

#### GENERIC OBSTACLES

People often have only a vague idea of the potential obstacles to compliance, yet have to frame a situation of some sort. One strategy is to select a general yet plausible obstacle and frame a situation to overcome it. You want Susan to hand you a pencil, believing she is able and willing to if asked. If you order her, "Hand me a pencil," that implies you have authority over her. Your tactic, instead, is to identify an innocuous obstacle – an unspecified inability or unwillingness to hand you a pencil – and frame the situation to overcome it, as with "Can you hand me a pencil?" or "Could you hand me a pencil?" This way you frame an equitable situation.

The tactic is to assume one of a small set of *generic obstacles* that are useful in situation after situation. Here are some examples with illustrations:

<b>Generic obstacle</b>	<b>Conventional pre-request</b>
B's ability and willingness	Can you hand me a pencil? Could you hand me a pencil?
B's knowledge	Do you know where Irene is?
B's physical ability	Do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?
B's intention	Will you try this shirt on? Would you try this shirt on?

Imposition on B A's permission to make a request	Would you mind passing the salt? May I ask you where you bought that tie?
---	--

The vaguer the obstacle, the more useful it should be, and indeed, “Can you...?” and “Could you...?” are among the commonest pre-requests in English.

Generic obstacles are so useful that *conventional pre-requests* have evolved for dealing with them. The first obstacle, for example, is usually handled with “Can you” or “Could you hand me a pencil?” and not “Are you capable of handing me a pencil?” or “Would you be able to hand me a pencil?” “Can you...?” and “Could you...?” have become the idiomatic or conventional linguistic devices for framing these situations. Other devices that could have evolved didn’t (see Morgan, 1978; Searle, 1975b). Conventional pre-requests have apparently evolved in most languages for dealing with generic obstacles (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

What does it mean for “Can you?” to be a conventional pre-request? First, A can expect B to be able to construe “Can you?” as a request – by assuming a generic obstacle. B doesn’t have to identify a specific obstacle in order to construe A as asking her to do something and what that something is. People have been shown to understand expressions like “Can you?” more quickly when construed as pre-requests than as mere questions about ability (Gibbs, 1979, 1981, 1983; Schweller, 1978). It is the other way around for non-conventional pre-requests like “Are you capable?” These are easier to construe as questions about ability than as preparations for requests.

It also means that “Can you?” is readily used as a *pro forma* condition for a request. When I ask a bank clerk “Can you tell me the current interest rate on savings accounts?” I am signaling that I don’t expect her to take my pre-request seriously. I’m not really interested in whether or not she can tell me the interest rate. She can answer simply “Six percent.” But when I word my pre-request “Are you able to tell me the current interest rate?” using a non-conventional form, I signal that she is to take the condition on my request seriously. In one study, here is how often bank clerks said yes to these two questions (Clark, 1979):

Caller's utterance	Clerk's response	Percent
Can you tell me...?	Yes, six percent	16
Are you able to tell me...?	Yes, six percent	35

The other clerks responded simply “Six percent.” So to use a conventional pre-request, such as “Can you tell me?” over “Are you able to tell me?” is ordinarily to signal that the condition is to be taken *pro forma*.

But pre-requests aren’t empty gestures just because they are *pro forma*. It is tempting to treat “Do you know who’s president of Mexico?” or “Do you know when the concert begins?” merely as polite equivalents to “Who’s president of Mexico?” and “When does the concert begin?” It is tempting to think they have no real content – that people respond to them mindlessly (Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz, 1978). But if that is all they are, I should be able to ask for your middle name by saying “Do you know your middle name?” and I can’t. You don’t respond mindlessly. For my pre-request to satisfy a preparatory condition, I must have reason to believe you wouldn’t know your middle name, and it is odd even to pretend you wouldn’t. The generic obstacle I frame with my pre-request counts.

### **Compliance**

The ultimate test of the situation Alan frames with his pre-request is whether it gets results: Does Barbara comply or not? For situations framed one way, B should be willing to commit herself to the joint purpose A is proposing, and for others, she should decline or withdraw. Equity theory makes one particularly strong prediction: The more costly the goods (all other things being equal), the less equitable the situation is for B and the less likely it is that she should comply. In one study (Latané and Darley, 1970), Columbia University students made one of five requests of hundreds of people on the streets of New York, and New Yorkers complied in the following percentages:

**Excuse me, I wonder if you could**

1. tell me what time it is?	85%
2. tell me how to get to Times Square?	84%
3. give me change for a quarter?	73%
4. tell me what your name is?	39%
5. give me a dime?	34%

Very roughly, it should cost New Yorkers less to give the time, directions, or change than to give their name or a dime. As predicted, the more costly the request, the fewer New Yorkers complied. Unfortunately, we are not told how the rest of the New Yorkers declined or withdrew.

By the same principle, New Yorkers should comply more readily when they are given something first. In the same study, students also made these four requests, with the following rates of success:

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. Excuse me, I wonder if you could give me a dime?              | 34% |
| 2. Excuse me, my name is—. I wonder if you could give me a dime? | 49% |
| 3. Excuse me, could you tell me what your name is?               | 39% |
| 4. Excuse me, my name is—. Could you tell me what your name is?  | 59% |

When the students stated their names, they were divulging something of value, and to satisfy equity, their addressees should have felt obliged to repay that cost. They did, for they complied more often in 2 and 4 than in 1 and 3.

Equity principles say that it should also make a difference how well the request is justified. Generally, A should try to frame a situation in which there is a legitimate justification for B to comply. The more legitimate the justification, the more likely B should comply. That was confirmed in the New York study with these four requests and their rates of compliance:

**Excuse me, I wonder if you could give me a dime?**

- |                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. [No additional justification]    | 34% |
| 2. I've spent all my money.         | 38% |
| 3. I need to make a telephone call. | 64% |
| 4. My wallet has been stolen.       | 72% |

Compliance was lowest for no justification and highest for the most legitimate justification (see also Langer and Abelson, 1972).

Justifications can be effective even when they are *pro forma*. In one well-known study (Langer et al., 1978), a student experimenter approached people at a copying machine in a university library and made one of these two requests:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1. Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine?<br>[No further justification]     | 60% |
| 2. Excuse me, I have five pages. May I use the Xerox machine,<br>because I have to make copies? | 93% |

In 1 the student offered no justification and succeeded only 60 percent of the time. In 2 she framed the situation as one in which she had a legitimate justification, even though the justification was in fact *pro forma*, and then she succeeded 93 percent of the time. A *pro forma* justification is more effective than no justification because it displays the speaker's intent to make the situation equitable.

All of these situations deal with B's face. B has the free will to comply or withdraw, and her choice depends in part on how she thinks it will affect her self-worth and autonomy. Large requests and requests

without legitimate justification tend to lower self-worth and autonomy. To comply, she has to take time from her affairs, which restricts her autonomy. She also cannot expect an adequate return for her pains, which eats into her self-worth.

#### POLITE RESPONSES

Compliance isn't all or nothing. When New Yorkers are asked "Excuse me, I wonder if you could give me a dime," they may comply and yet complain: "I'll give you a dime, but not one cent more." If they decline, they may do it only half-heartedly: "Sorry, I don't have one on me." Or they may show how offended they are by the proposal: "Not on your life." Comments like these are attempts to deal with equity beyond mere compliance, declination, or withdrawal. They display just how committed B is to the joint project proposed by A.

As we have seen, politeness has to do with how Alan and Barbara deal publicly with each other's self-worth and autonomy. We have already looked at A's politeness. All else being equal, the less threatening the joint task A is proposing is to B's self-worth or autonomy, the more polite A is judged to be. But much the same principle should apply to B's response: All else being equal, the less threatening B's response is to A's self-worth or autonomy, the more polite B is judged to be. If B complies, she should be judged more polite the more committed she is. If she declines, she should be judged more polite the more legitimate her justification.

These predictions are confirmed in judgments of politeness. In one study, people were asked to judge alternative responses to a series of requests (Clark and Schunk, 1980). One of these requests was "Can you direct me to Lost and Found?" Here A is proposing both a preparatory project ("Can you direct me?") and, electively, a transfer of information ("Please direct me"). So B is being asked to commit to two projects. She should be considered most polite when she commits to both, and less polite the less committed she is to either one. Here are four alternative ways of complying:

**Can you direct me to Lost and Found?**

1. Certainly. It's around the corner.
2. Yes, I can. It's around the corner.
3. Yes. It's around the corner.
4. It's around the corner.

Of the responses that deal explicitly with the preparatory task, 1 is the most enthusiastic, and 2 is more explicit than 3. As predicted, 1 was judged most polite, 2 next most polite, 3 next most polite, and 4 least polite. If, instead, B declines either project, she should be judged more polite the more legitimately she accounts for her declination. Here are three alternative ways of declining:

**Can you direct me to Lost and Found?**

5. No, I'm sorry. I can't.
6. No, I can't.
7. No.

Both 5 and 6 offer a legitimate reason for declining, and 5 offers an apology in addition. As expected, 5 was judged most polite, 6 less polite, and 7 least polite.

Traditionally, politeness is viewed as a property of A's and B's unilateral actions (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973). But like most aspects of transfers of goods, it too is determined jointly. As an illustration, suppose Verona has made a request of me, and I consider three alternative responses:

**Did you tell me what time the party is tonight?**

1. Yes, I did, five minutes ago. It's at nine.
2. Yes, I did. It's at nine.
3. Oh – it's at nine.

Verona uses her pre-request to frame a situation in which she cannot recall whether or not I told her the time of the party tonight – hence she needs the time of the party. If I haven't told her, then I should now. If I have, then she is giving me the opportunity to chasten her for her lapse of memory. Now although it is polite for her to *offer* me this opportunity, it would be impolite for me to *take up* the offer, as with response 1 or 2. The polite thing to do is forgo the chastening and give her the time, as in response 3.

How polite Verona and I are here depends on the cooperation of the other. She is polite if I respond with 3. She has offered me the opportunity to chasten her even if I don't take it. But if I respond with 1 or 2, I also make *her* seem less polite. It would be as if I were to say, "You tried to make me responsible for your not knowing the party time, but I'm not. I told you five minutes ago. Shame on you for not remembering. Here is the time again." With response 1 or 2, I might even force her to apologize, as with "Sorry, thanks." So although I may be impolite in responding

with I, I make her out to be impolite too. Politeness is determined by how Verona and I choose to view each other, and we establish that through our joint actions.

For requests introduced by pre-requests, then, B is judged to be polite when she deals with both proposed projects (Clark and Schunk, 1980). For the proposed transfer of goods (e.g., “Can you direct me to Lost and Found?”), she is judged more polite if she:

1. complies fully (“It’s around the corner”)
2. does so clearly (“It’s around the corner” instead of “Around the corner”)
3. apologizes when she cannot (“Sorry”)
4. justifies herself when she cannot (“I can’t”)

For the preparatory joint project, she is judged more polite if she:

1. commits herself to it explicitly (“Yes”)
2. does so with clarity (“Yes, I can”)
3. makes the commitment especially serious if it is not *pro forma* (“I’d be happy to”)
4. deals with any negative repercussions of its completion

Every choice A makes affects the force of B’s options, and vice versa, so even politeness is determined jointly.

### **Conclusions**

Joint projects require people to commit to doing things with each other. When Alan commits himself to riding a tandem bicycle with Barbara, his commitment is special. He is committing himself to her only on condition that she is committing herself to him. If he fails to do his part, not only does he renege to Barbara, but he undercuts her own commitment to him. It is no wonder joint commitments affect equity and face. Alan’s actions affect the public perception not only of his own self-worth and autonomy, but of Barbara’s.

Exchanges of goods are generally engineered to maintain the face of the participants. When Alan proposes an exchange with Barbara, he is expected to presuppose a method for maintaining equity with Barbara. In closed situations, like buying a ticket at a movie theater, he can accomplish that by calling on a routine procedure (“One, please”). In other situations, he has to do something more. A common method is to use a pre-request (e.g., “Do you happen to know where Goldberg’s Grocery is?”) to frame a situation that makes the exchange equitable. The goal is to overcome the most likely, or greatest, obstacle to Barbara’s

commitment, and that is often done by framing generic obstacles (as with “Can you tell me where Goldberg’s Grocery is?”). Still, Alan’s success in maintaining equity depends on what Barbara does in response. The politeness of each depends on the actions of both.

Other joint projects manage face in other ways. Indeed, managing face is the primary purpose for many. Compliments, offers, thanks, congratulations, greetings, and apologies increase the self-worth or autonomy of one or both of the participants, whereas insults, reprimands, censures, and criticisms do just the opposite. Exchanges of goods are different in that their primary purpose is to effect the transfer of goods, yet they cannot be carried out without managing face. Equity and face appear to constrain all actions that require joint commitments.