



**California Center for Population Research**  
**University of California - Los Angeles**

# Obfuscatory Relational Work and Disreputable Exchange

Gabriel Rossman

**PWP-CCPR-2012-020**

**December 19, 2012**

*California Center for Population Research  
On-Line Working Paper Series*

# Obfuscatory Relational Work and Disreputable Exchange\*

Gabriel Rossman

Sociology, UCLA  
264 Haines Hall  
LA, CA 90095-1551

310-206-8904

rossman@soc.ucla.edu

\*This research benefited from National Science Foundation award number SES-0724914 and a Sloan foundation Industry Studies Fellowship. The author is grateful to Ari Adut, Nina Bandelj, Alan Fiske, Alice Goffman, Neil Gross, Dan Lainer-Vos, Oliver Schilke, Stefan Timmermans, and Viviana Zelizer.

Keywords: Relational work, economic sociology, morality

Forthcoming in *Sociological Theory*

## Abstract

This article develops a model for how the structure of exchange can accomplish relational work to manage such disreputable exchanges as the commensuration of sacred for profane. Whereas extant research has discussed rhetorical reframing of exchange, this paper suggests a more profound reconceptualization through structures that obfuscate that an exchange is occurring and thereby mitigate exchange taboos. The article develops three such exchange structures: bundling, brokerage, and gift exchange. Bundling uses cross-subsidization across innocuous circuits to synthesize a taboo circuit. Brokerage finds a third party to accept responsibility for exchange. Gift exchange delays reciprocity and reframes exchanges as expressions of friendship. All three of these strategies have alternative meanings and so provide plausible deniability to taboo commensuration. The paper concludes by arguing that engaging in such structural “relational work” to evade taboos represents a synthesis of “nothing but” and “hostile worlds,” rather than an alternative to them as Zelizer suggests.

The core premise of economics is that human beings exchange to achieve gains from trade. However nearly all cultures consider some potential positive sum trades to be morally inappropriate. For instance, in contemporary American culture it is generally considered immoral to pay money for sex acts or human organs. Often such taboos are simply honored and we refrain from engaging in disreputable exchange. In other cases we see explicit moral suasion to argue that such exchanges should be understood as reputable. However this article discusses a class of practices in which actors neither overtly challenge exchange taboos nor refrain from engaging in them but rather circumvent taboos through transactions that are structured so as to partially or totally obfuscate that a disreputable exchange is occurring at all.

Such structural obfuscation is common and shapes important aspects of economy and society. For instance, it is exceedingly rare for physicians to accept naked bribes from pharmaceutical companies. Rather pharmaceutical companies are known for sending physicians to conferences at luxury resorts, giving them honoraria to deliver lectures, sending attractive and pleasant sales reps to provide them with free samples, etc. In theory a doctor could accept such favors from pharmaceutical companies and still refrain from prescribing the company's drugs and yet there is an expectation of reciprocity. It is for this reason that such practices are understood to create a "conflict of interest" and so are dubiously ethical, but even still they are *relatively* tolerable compared to unconscionable open kickbacks.

Likewise, although the occasional Congressman is discovered with piles of cash in his freezer, contemporary accusations of political corruption in the United States tend to be relatively subtle. Hence there is suspicion about campaign contributions and PACs as well of practices like hiring the spouse or former staffers of a legislator as a consultant or lobbyist. In extreme cases we see things like Representative "Duke" Cunningham selling his house to a lobbyist for a suspiciously high price above market value. As with pharmaceutical marketing, such practices can attract suspicion or criticism (and indeed, Cunningham is currently in prison) but they are facially *less* disreputable than outright purchase of legislation for cash and many of these practices are routine.

We even see similar patterns in antiquity where exchange taboos tended to be about the impropriety of senators engaging in commerce or professional services. Senators were able to square the circle of seeing themselves as Cincinnatus at his plow while still engaging in commerce by making their involvement in commercial enterprises tastefully indirect. Hence Cicero could affirm the custom that legal representation should be undertaken "without payment" but still acknowledge that it was useful for getting the powerful to owe a lawyer favors and boast that he had himself honorably inherited twenty million sesterces (about forty million dollars)

from grateful deceased clients (Cicero 1926:105, 1967:125). And we see Cato the Censor compare usury to murder but still underwrite shipping expeditions through the proxy of a freedman (Cicero 1967:134; Plutarch 2001:474–475).

A wide variety of exchange practices can be understood as indirection with the effect of ameliorating disgust. When two interactions are otherwise equivalent in terms of what flows from ego to alter and vice versa, we tend to see sublimated transactionalism as more palatable than open quid pro quos. Moreover, understanding this process provides the analytical leverage to begin reconciling the theoretical paradox in economic sociology and economic anthropology that is the nature of transactionalism (Bourdieu 2000; Zelizer 2005).

Of course the causally prior issue to how people negotiate exchange taboos is that we first see some exchange circuits as taboo. Although exchange taboos exhibit considerable diversity in practice, for clarity of exposition it is helpful to refer to a typical disreputable circuit involving the commensuration of sacred and profane exchange objects (Zelizer 1978).<sup>1</sup> In this technical usage, “sacred” need not necessarily carry the colloquial connotations of divinity or holiness but only the etymologically core meaning of something “set apart,” regardless of whether it is so distinct because it is exalted or because it is fouled (Douglas 1966). This basic idea of a taboo commensuration of sacred for profane appears in many discussions of exchange taboos under such names as “disparate relational models,” “market inalienability,” “corruption,” “intrusions” of goods across “spheres,” or “hostile worlds” (Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Krawiec 2009; Sandel 2000; Walzer 1983; Zelizer 2000). I will not venture to explain why a culture considers some objects to be sacred and others profane. Nor will I attempt to explain why one culture considers an exchange to be taboo whereas another finds it completely unremarkable. Rather I will bracket these issues as causally prior motivation for a discussion of how people sometimes use structural obfuscation to manage circuits that they find to be taboo.

Figure 1 diagrams three basic forms of exchange circuits. In these circuits the actors are nodes labeled ego and alter, and the arcs are goods exchanged between the actors, with profane goods labeled A and sacred goods as B. Reciprocated goods going back from alter to ego are further marked as prime. The first circuit is the exchange of profane for profane, for instance a customer and a grocer exchanging cash for groceries. The second circuit is the exchange of sacred for sacred, such as a married couple exchanging sexual intimacy. Both of these circuits maintain the boundary between sacred and profane and are therefore reputable. However, the third circuit shows a disreputable exchange of profane for sacred, such as a john and prostitute exchanging cash for sexual intimacy. Although for clarity of exposition this article uses fairly extreme examples of disreputable circuits like prostitution and bribery, we can also imagine the argument applying to more subtle exchanges, such as faculty giving students cookies before distributing course evaluation surveys.

## Figure 1 About Here

These taboos on commensuration of sacred and profane can be consequential not only for the individuals who engage in disreputable circuits but on the scale of history. Most notably, the proximate cause of the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther's dispute with Pope Leo X over the Church's sale of indulgences, which Luther decried as the commensuration of profane money with sacred absolution from venial sin, which could only be legitimately commensurated with other sacred goods: prayer, penance, and time in Purgatory. This dispute over the legitimacy of the money-absolution circuit served as the catalyst for profound changes in religion and politics, not to mention millions of deaths in the Thirty Years' War. More recently, DARPA (the military's research arm) created the Policy Analysis Market as a way to exploit the power of prices to serve as efficient summaries of otherwise incomprehensibly complex bodies of information (Hayek 1945; Polk et al. 2003). Congress killed the project immediately on learning about it, primarily because of their indignation that a market in "terrorism futures" constituted blood money, a commensuration of the profane (monetary payouts from futures contracts) with the sacred (Americans murdered by terrorists) (Hanson 2007). Of course, to the extent that one believes the economic theory underlying the Policy Analysis Market, such squeamishness has seriously hobbled American intelligence.

The hostility that meets such disreputable circuits can dramatically reshape the relational work that characterizes them. Collins notes that because "disreputable or illegal circuits" are illicit, "rituals and symbols of everyday encounters within these circuits are very different in tone" from those that characterize reputable circuits (Collins 2004:267). Similarly, offensive statements and suggestions tend to be phrased indirectly and ambiguously, with criminal speech (such as floating a bribe) being the extreme case (Pinker, Nowak, and Lee 2008). More generally, Fiske and Tetlock (1997) suggest that taboo commensurations are often concealed or obfuscated.

Although Collins emphasizes how exchange partners are motivated to avoid the attention of the police, social sanctions and stigma can also motivate such practices. Consider the taboo most contemporary Americans feel towards an explicit sex-money circuit. A contemporary American man who is considering hiring a prostitute should probably be less concerned with the trivial punishments that most jurisdictions impose on johns than with the ostracism he would likely face should this act become known to his family and peers. Furthermore, he might consider it a severe blow to his own understanding of his morality and/or masculinity if he were to define himself as someone who "pays for sex." Social sanction and self-reproach may remain severe barriers even in such jurisdictions as Nevada where prostitution is merely disreputable, but not punishable by law. Alternately we can imagine exchanges that are illegal but lack social sanction or self-reproach. Historically, this

has been a common attitude towards tax evasion, including smuggling for the purpose of evading tariffs (Scott 1985; Torgler 2007). Of course in many cases formal and informal sanctions will correlate and so in practice people will seek to obfuscate with regards to both the police and to their peers, but in cases where the reaction of only one audience is feared this will shape the interaction accordingly.

People generally tend to avoid punishment, stigma, and self-reproach. Of course the most direct way to do so is to simply honor the taboo and norms indeed seem to have non-trivial effects on action (Vaisey 2009). Indeed, actors may demand long developing relationships with trading partners in order to build trust that goods will not be used in taboo fashion (Wherry 2012). When actors are not dissuaded outright from engaging in disreputable circuits, they may seek ways to avoid sanctions. Prior research has shown how actors rhetorically reframe their exchanges as legitimate, often by emphasizing the social benefits that accrue from the exchanges or the sympathetic people who benefit or by emphasizing altruistic motives in both the selection of and interaction with exchange partners (Anteby 2010; Haylett 2012; Quinn 2008; Zelizer 1978).<sup>2</sup> Alternately, taboo suggestions can be shrouded in indirect speech so as to allow enough ambiguity as to maintain plausible deniability (Pinker et al. 2008). Similarly, markets with a monetary aspect may use prices in symbolically loaded ways, which may involve setting the price above or below market clearing (Wherry 2008). For instance, some participants in human tissue markets charge at cost in order to demonstrate disinterested motives (Anteby 2010). Conversely, dealers in the art market feel a moral obligation to keep prices high so as to preserve the Veblen good value of art, which would be undermined by explicit discounting (Velthuis 2003). This article discusses situations where relational work goes beyond rhetoric and prices but rather relational definitions of the situation reshape the very structure of circuits and transactions (Fuhse 2009).

In contrast to the relative simplicity of many reputable profane–profane circuits, actors involved in circuits that commensurate the sacred and profane may form the circuit in convoluted ways wherein the commensuration is less explicit. Thus we can ask, what are the differences in the structure of an exchange wherein a record label buys an ad in a magazine as compared to buying radio airplay? to arrange a fixed-rate on the principal loan in a culture that sees this as mundane versus one that sees it as sinful? for a man to buy a drink as compared to buying a woman’s affections? To paraphrase Goffman (1963:88), the argument of this article is that what would be nonchalant *quid pro quo* for reputable exchanges can become elaborate structures for discreditable exchanges. In particular whereas much of the literature has emphasized that disentanglement of persons and objects from social relationships is necessary to transform them into commodities (Callon 1998; See also Graeber 2011:146), the argument of this article is that obfuscating disreputable exchange often involves *re-entanglement* so as to make objects look *less* commodified. This logic follows from Fiske and Tetlocke’s (1997) argument that

disreputability in exchange often stems from moving goods appropriate to intimate relationships into a market context. Thus whereas superficial encounters like those with the supermarket cashier are much more routinized than personal friendships (Fuhse 2009:61), one way to mitigate the scandal of routinizing sacred-profane exchanges is to de-routinize and re-entangle them.

In some cases these complicated structures merely demonstrate discretion, but frequently they achieve a more profound redefinition of the situation, which encompasses one or both actors in the exchange and thereby insulates them from self-reproach. As Bourdieu (2000:192) argues, there is “collective self-deception” about the twofold truth of gifts, that they are both expressions of relationships *and* forms of exchange. As implied by the phrase “self-deception,” the parties to an exchange do not necessarily subjectively perceive it as economic in nature. Thus we can speak of it being (to use Bourdieu’s favorite phrase) *as if* actors were trying to obfuscate but recognize that the dual-process of intuition and reasoning means that this may characterize their subjective experience quite well, only loosely, or not at all (Vaisey 2009). Moreover, parties to an interaction may vary considerably in the extent to which they perceive it as calculable and in many of the examples I present below there seems to be a special delicacy surrounding one role or another.<sup>3</sup> Alternately stated, structural obfuscation will eliminate open awareness (in which the exchange is common knowledge to its participants) but what remains instead may be closed, suspicion, or pretense (Glaser and Strauss 1964). Likewise, to say that a practice obfuscates taboos does not mean it does so completely or in every instance. Indeed there is an expository value to liminal cases as in order for us to recognize an exchange as obfuscating an exchange taboo, the exchange has to remain somewhat disreputable even in its mitigated form.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the same behaviors that would normally be tolerated or tactfully ignored remain discreditable and can become scandalous through the efforts of a determined moral entrepreneur (Adut 2008; Goffman 1963). This risk of hostile intercession to discredit the discreditable characterizes exchanges that are vulnerable to accusations that they are essentially equivalent to scandalous exchanges. Most of the examples discussed in this article will fall into a middle ground on both subjective understanding and efficacy at taboo mitigation: actors may be dimly aware that they are flirting with disreputability and structural obfuscation will mitigate the disreputability without eliminating it.

This article describes three ways that the structure of circuits can be used as relational work to mitigate the disreputability of exchange. In all three forms relational work goes beyond rhetoric and/or prices, as in the extant literature, to restructure the exchange. Bundling is the aggregation of multiple circuits between the same transactants. Brokerage is the mediation of a third party between the transactants. Gift exchange is when the transactants exchange asynchronously and the exchange is framed as being about the nature of their relationship. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of how obfuscating disreputable exchange through



relational work does not represent a rejection of taboos on exchange, but rather their circumvention and even backhanded affirmation.

## Bundling

The Qur'an contains several passages that forbid *riba*.<sup>5</sup> The concept definitely has something to do with debt but it is not obvious from the text itself exactly what kinds of debt are *riba* and a considerable body of Islamic jurisprudence addresses the details of what is forbidden. Fairly early on the narrow reading of *riba* as debt bondage lost out to a broad interpretation of it as any interest, regardless of whether human beings are collateral. Nonetheless sharia law allows a loophole with *murabaha*, an institution which combines theoretically distinct transactions to synthesize what are, in effect, fixed-points on the principal loans.

[Muslims] went on [charging interest] through various ruses, such as the following practice that leading jurists endowed with legitimacy: A wants to lend B \$100 at 5 percent interest, but without violating the ban. So he buys a chair from B in return for \$100 and then promptly returns it for \$105, payable in one year. The chair's ownership remains unchanged; B receives \$100 now; and A stands to receive \$105 in a year. Although the individual transactions involve no interest, together they are equivalent to a single transaction whereby A lends \$100 to B at 5 percent per annum. (Kuran 2004:15)

Thus we see a use of bundling to achieve the equivalent to a disreputable circuit (ego lends money to alter at interest) by combining one reputable circuit (sale from ego to alter with immediate payment) with a second reputable circuit (sale from alter to ego with deferred payment).

Bundling refers to exchanges which could in principle be separated but are nonetheless packaged together as a single exchange. The two major reasons for bundling discussed in the economics literature are efficiency and price discrimination.<sup>6</sup> In the sorts of issues familiar to micro-economics, bundling may also be used as a form of relational work. This sense of bundling is related to Zelizer's concept of "differentiated ties" (Zelizer 2000). This structure occurs when ego and alter engage in multiple types of exchanges. For instance, the 1924 case of *Stewart v. Waterman* involved a man and woman whose relationship began as an exchange of money for housecleaning labor and over time also developed a romantic and sexual dimension (Zelizer 2000:830). Zelizer suggests that in a differentiated ties relationship, actors can engage in multiple circuits operating in parallel, notwithstanding the frequent objections that the two circuits constitute "hostile worlds" or that the sacred circuit is ultimately "nothing but" a profane one. We can conceive of bundling as a more cynical interpretation of differentiated ties,

wherein the actors in fact are implicitly or explicitly attempting to commensurate sacred and profane but use bundling to make this disreputable commensuration appear to be a set of reputable circuits operating parallel to one another.

Figure 2 illustrates how bundling can accomplish this goal. Suppose that ego and alter wish to form a circuit that exchanges the profane good A for the sacred good B' but to do so in a palatable manner. They may form what appears to be two circuits, an exchange of a valuable profane good for one of only token value and an exchange of a token value sacred good for a valuable sacred good. In the figure the token goods are shown as lower-case to denote their trivial value. The actors can then maintain the pretext that there is no scandal about their exchange since they are engaged in differentiated ties of two reputable circuits, profane for profane and sacred for sacred.

### Figure 2 About Here

The possibility of incommensurable dimensions of value bleeding between bundled circuits may explain why people are so often uncomfortable with differentiated ties relationships, to the point of subjecting them to formal sanctions (Zelizer 2005). Such objections are based on the (sometimes accurate and sometimes not) suspicion that the circuits taken individually are not fully reciprocal in value and this gap is made up for by cross-subsidizing value across the circuits, which means that on net the relationship forms a disreputable sacred–profane circuit. For instance, professional societies generally prohibit sex between professionals and their clients on the stated grounds that the sexual aspect of the relationship and the professional–client aspect of the relationship could bleed into each other, including the possibility that the terms of compensation for professional services (e.g., waiving fees) could implicitly constitute payment for sex (Zelizer 2005).

Because bundling is framed as multiple exchanges of different types between the same set of actors, it can facilitate exchanges they would prefer to avoid engaging in openly. For instance, mainstream news outlets consider it unethical to pay news sources.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, witnesses to spectacular crimes do get paid. To evade their own ethical rules, major television networks will buy documents such as family photos and home movies from witnesses (Kolhatkar 2010). The witness then “volunteers” to be interviewed. In principle the news organization is not violating its own rule against money–interview circuits but is only forming differentiated ties with the witness, a money–documents circuit alongside an interview–exposure circuit, and this obviates the ethical transgression against “checkbook journalism.”

## Brokerage

From 2004 through 2006, the Senate committee on Indian Affairs and other investigators revealed the role of lobbyist Jack Abramoff in American politics (Continetti 2006; United States Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs 2006). Like all lobbyists, Abramoff helped connect interests seeking favorable legislation or administrative rulings to policymakers, but Abramoff's activities became scandalous when revealed and denounced by moral entrepreneurs in the US Senate and political press. Many of his clients were Indian tribes seeking to promote their own casinos and/or inhibit competition from other gambling interests. For instance, Abramoff brokered a deal between the Choctaw nation and former Christian Coalition president Ralph Reed, in which the Choctaw paid Reed millions of dollars through Abramoff's firm in exchange for which Reed rallied religious right social movements against video poker and other potential competition to Choctaw casinos.

Both Choctaw executives and Reed were cognizant of the nature of the deal but sought to keep it discreet since bootlegger-Baptist coalitions, in which an interested party uses an ideological actor as a political front, lack legitimacy by nature (Yandle 1983). Reed's ability to serve the interests of the Choctaw, eLottery, and other gambling interests by rallying religious conservatives depended on his ability to frame his actions as a principled opposition to gambling and fell apart once they were revealed as an attempt to protect the territory of one gambling interest against competition from another or even to block legislation unfavorable to gamblers.

Throughout it all, Reed took great pains to make sure that he never *directly* received money from gambling interests. If that were to happen, it would pose a problem to his future political ambitions, as he is on record saying that gambling is a "cancer" on the body politic and that he had been "opposed to gambling throughout my entire career." So he and Abramoff found ways around direct payments. (Continetti 2006:153)

Hence, Abramoff's role was not only to introduce gambling interests to Reed, but his persistent brokerage of the deal allowed the two primary parties to obfuscate what would have otherwise been a relatively obvious bootlegger-Baptist deal, with all the disreputability that implies, if gambling interests had paid Reed directly.

Brokers are actors who facilitate and mediate exchange and usually extract resources for their troubles (Fernandez-Mateo 2007; Stovel and Shaw 2012). With the popularity of social network analysis, brokerage increasingly refers to taking advantage of a structural position of power (often measured as betweenness centrality) in a social network where paths between ego and alter pass through the broker (Burt 1992; Freeman 1977; Marsden 1982). In some cases a broker

facilitates markets where actors on at least one side of the market tend to be low volume traders. For instance, since cultural industries often work on a project basis, such brokers as talent agents and talent scouts are extremely important in mediating relations between artists and cultural firms (Bielby and Bielby 1999; DiMaggio 1977; Zuckerman 2004). Likewise, people who need access to some sort of bureaucratic corruption usually don't do so routinely and such services can obviously not be openly advertised, hence those seeking a corrupt service may rely on brokers to identify a corrupt counter-party even if they do not especially care about sublimating the venal nature of the interaction (Jancsics 2013).

A central problem for the brokerage literature is how brokers maintain their position of brokerage (Stovel, Golub, and Milgrom 2011). Precisely because primaries are structurally vulnerable to exploitation by brokers, primaries will tend to distrust brokers.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, subsequent to the initial brokered exchange we would expect to see triadic closure, after which the primaries can exclude the broker. Hence, the persistence of brokerage requires a substantive mechanism to overcome its structural ephemerality. One such mechanism is that brokers are often of a distinct (even stigmatized) social type for whom trading is seen as an appropriate role. That is, it may be taboo for ego and alter to trade directly and the broker takes on moral responsibility for forming the circuit.

Figure 3 shows a brokerage relationship. Ego gives profane good A to the broker, which the broker passes on to alter (presumably after having taken a cut). Alter then gives ego sacred good B'. In this model no two actors directly exchange A for B' and the transfers are sequential so the circuit's exchange of sacred and profane remains relatively subtle. Hence ego, and possibly also alter, have plausible deniability that taboos are being violated. For this reason we might expect that ego will sometimes have a more naïve view of the exchange than does the broker on the "I didn't ask questions how he did it" model. Brokerage may thus serve to make the broker assume legal risk when the exchange is illegal, but it can also serve to make a legal but tacky exchange more palatable by making the commensuration of sacred and profane less salient to ego and/or alter.

### Figure 3 About Here

One common form of brokerage can be found in labor relations. Brokerage for labor can serve entirely reputable purposes such as reducing search costs, as when a parent who does not personally know any suitable neighborhood teenagers contracts with a service to find and vouch for a babysitter. However, another purpose brokers can serve is to insulate ego from moral or legal responsibility for engaging the labor of inappropriate people or under inappropriate terms, that is, for violating taboos following from what Sandel calls "the argument from coercion." For instance, the early 1980s decline in private-sector unionization of Los Angeles janitors took the form of subcontractors mediating relationships between building

management and the janitors (Waldinger et al. 1998). More generally, labor conditions ranging from legal but unfavorable employment terms to outright labor law violations often occur with subcontractors and a major strategy of labor activists and unions is to discredit the discreditable by framing brokerage as irrelevant, with the labor relationship being in essence a circuit of the primaries.

As an example of brokerage serving to make a disreputable exchange of profane for sacred less salient, consider establishments where men implicitly pay women to dance or flirt with them. Unlike paying for sex, there is nothing illegal about paying for dancing or flirtation. This happens fairly explicitly at taxi dance halls, where men use token money to buy a minute or two of dancing time with a woman (Cressey 2008; Wright 1999). However for some people it may spoil the interaction for the exchange of money for flirtation to be too explicit. As such, some businesses use brokerage as a form of relational work, to restructure the exchange of money for flirtation into something that assumes the form of conventional courtship.

A late 19th and early 20th century form was the “ ‘49 dance hall” or “ ‘49 camp” in which “the dancing was free and the partners or ‘hostesses’ secured their income not from the dancing, but upon the amount of liquor which they could persuade the patrons to buy at the adjoining bar” (Cressey 2008:24–25). Rather than paying a woman for a dance as in a taxi dance hall, at a ‘49 dance hall a man merely dances with a woman and he buys overpriced drinks from the bar, which will later pay the woman a commission. Hence in this form of enterprise we see the bar serving as a broker such that the dance partners need not directly exchange cash, or even token money.<sup>9</sup>

Similar but more subtle services are found at high-end nightclubs where as part of “bottle service” the bar’s VIP host serves a brokerage role facilitating flirting with important customers (Taddeo 2010). In these clubs, men will buy alcohol at a several thousand percent markup. The host will then find attractive young women guests and encourage them to join the customer’s party so as to get free drinks and potentially meet a rich boyfriend. The relational work of structuring the exchange so it facially follows the rituals of courtship allows the customer to maintain the understanding that the flirtation with the women is a sacred–sacred circuit of charm being exchanged in kind and his profane interaction of \$2500 plus tip for a couple bottles of Grey Goose with the nightclub can be understood as orthogonal.

One special type of good we can see exchanged through bundling is status.<sup>10</sup> In the status tradition, an economic actor’s status is not only revealed, but arguably *constituted* by the patterns of deference and association the actor is enmeshed within (Gould 2002; Martin 2009; Podolny 2001, 2005). That is, status is both operationalized and conceived of as a network concept. One implication is that because low status actors can raise their status through association with high status actors, this gives high status actors the ability to demand preferential terms of trade

(Podolny 2005). For instance, Apple is able to get some of its suppliers to sell at close to cost because Apple is so prestigious that this increase's the supplier's status. In effect then, such exchanges involve the bundling together of profane goods with a transfer of status. This example differs somewhat from the other cases discussed in this article insofar as it is not exactly *disreputable* for firms to sell status a la carte so much as is it *impossible* because status only exists insofar as it is agreed to exist and third-parties would not be impressed by an open sale of status.

## Gift exchange

Under US Code 47 § 317 it is a crime, colloquially known as “payola,” to pay a radio station to play a song. That is, the federal government understands the artistic gatekeeping decisions of radio disk jockeys and programmers to be sacred. Nonetheless, record labels have a strong incentive to pay for airplay (Coase 1979; Hirsch 1972). Historically, payola is often organized as a (furtive) quid pro quo (Dannen 1990; Fisher 2007). From the 1950s through the mid-1980s, relationships between record labels and radio stations were usually structured as quid pro quos, often with the involvement of professional brokers. Following scrutiny from the press and federal prosecutors in 1986, the Recording Industry Association of America voted in reforms that displaced the incumbent semi-criminal brokers (Dannen 1990). The post-1986 system still involves record labels giving pecuniary resources to radio stations and radio stations giving airplay to record labels, but the new system is much more subtle than the old model of quid pro quo.

Many documents from the reformed system reflect a language of friendship and favors between record labels (or their brokers) and radio stations (Rossman 2012). Although quid pro quos can be found, it is not uncommon to see one party offer or request a favor or gift without any explicit mention of reciprocity. Nonetheless, there is an asymmetry to the nature of these favors in that favors from labels to stations always take the form of something of pecuniary value (e.g., plane tickets, concert tickets, consumer electronics) and favors from stations to labels consist of airplay. Similarly, Ahlqvist and Faulkner (2002) interviewed radio programmers who accepted gifts, but claimed that they only did so after they had already committed to their creative decisions. In contrast another programmer had a different view, claiming to refuse gifts from record labels on grounds that “I would hate to be in a situation where I felt I had to play a record because I owed somebody a favor” (Ahlqvist and Faulkner 2002:201). Thus programmers who refuse gifts from labels suspect that it is ultimately a form of exchange, but even if these holdouts are correct to view record label gifts as transactional, the indirect structure of the exchange makes it subtle enough so as to not subjectively feel like a quid pro quo to those programmers who do practice gift exchange.

Figure 4 provides a schematic illustration of gift exchange relationships.<sup>11</sup> Ego gives a good to alter without any explicit reciprocity. Usually at some later time, alter gives a good to ego. The lack of explicit reciprocity and the delay make reciprocity semi-voluntary and this obfuscates that in some sense the gifts are exchanged for each other (Bourdieu 1990, 2000). In the schematic, the initial gift is profane and the reciprocity sacred, but any combination can work. It is common, but not essential, for gifts to be in-kind to convey a sense of intimacy rather than payment. Even when gifts are monetary, they are often earmarked for particular purposes or delivered with ceremony (Zelizer 1994). Furthermore, over the course of time a relationship may involve many transfers in both directions.

Figure 4 About Here

Variations on gift exchange are extremely common forms of exchange historically and cross-culturally, indeed more important than market exchange in non-industrial societies (Bohannan 1955; Carrier 1991; Graeber 2011; Mauss 1967). However the vestigial form taken by gift exchange in modern societies changes its character such that its usage implies a distinction in kind “between things that are free and things that have a price-tag,” between sacred and profane (Bourdieu 2000:197). Similarly, Fiske (1992) provides a somewhat more complicated model of four “relational models” of exchange (market pricing plus three forms of gifts) and argues that exchange taboos can be understood as commensurating goods that belong to different models, especially when goods appropriate to communal sharing are exchanged through market pricing (Fiske and Tetlock 1997).

In principle, gift exchange is embedded within a social relationship and gifts in either direction are seen as reflecting ego and alter’s relationship (Bohannan 1955). That is, rather than understanding A as being (asynchronously) exchanged for A’, a smoothly functioning gift exchange treats A as an expression of ego’s relationship to alter and A’ as an expression of alter’s relationship to ego. The reality underlining this perception is that gifts and counter-gifts are given sequentially and reciprocity is semi-voluntary. The essential distinction between gift exchange and *quid pro quo* is that a gift is given irrevocably before a counter-gift is offered. For instance, universities classify industry money as gifts (and thus exempt from indirects, unlike sponsored research) “only if funds are awarded irrevocably” (Biscotti et al. 2012:285). This makes a gift a sequential variant on the prisoner’s dilemma and game theory tells us that a rational alter in such a game should defect and by backwards induction so should a rational ego. This is even more complicated if opportunity for reciprocity is not immediate, but plays out over time such that ego who has yet to receive a counter-gift from alter must wonder if alter has truly defected or if reciprocity is merely right-censored (Bourdieu 1990).<sup>12</sup> For gift exchange to be accomplished then requires interpersonal trust and/or socialization

into the institution of the gift. It is for this reason that successful use of gift exchange can build trust (Molm, Takahashi, and Peterson 2000).

The perspective of exchange reflecting and intensifying the underlying relationship between ego and alter is seen in the first papal encyclical of Benedict XVI (2005), which contrasts two opposing aspects of the single phenomenon of love. Benedict describes eros (needy love, including lust) as by nature good and an essential part of the human experience but vulnerable to degradation, as when “[e]ros, reduced to pure ‘sex’, has become a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity.” The pope argues that human existence is most ennobled when eros develops into and fuses with agape (selfless love), such that transfers are both given and received as expressions of love. It follows that in this ideal form of gift exchange, ego and alter will have a somewhat relaxed accounting of reciprocity since (at least in theory) they are not exchanging goods for their own sake but to express their social bond. If ego treats alter to a moderately priced dinner and then alter reciprocates on another occasion by treating ego to an expensive dinner, it would be boorish for ego to make up the cash difference since what is being exchanged is dinner and the company that goes with it rather than the cash value of the bills.

Because gift exchange can frame circuits as mutual expressions of a relationship rather than as exchange, it facilitates the commensuration of profane and sacred. This can be true even if the relationship is entered into with the expectation that it will facilitate such a commensuration. The difference between prostitute and john on the one hand versus sugar baby and sugar daddy on the other is largely an issue of whether a man and woman explicitly bargain over a sex–money circuit as compared to a less formal understanding that he will give her gifts (Zelizer 2005). A set of facts along these lines faced the US District Court in the 2009 case *United States v. Roger Weiner*. The defendant, a politically-active cardiologist, had an account on the dating website “sugardaddyforme.com” (Balko 2009). FBI agents repeatedly contacted Dr. Weiner through the site with offers to meet but their solicitations were apparently too explicit for him, and he rebuffed them by explaining that there is “a difference between a sugar baby and a hooker, and I’m not interested in a hooker.” Weiner replied more favorably to another inquiry that did not involve an explicit discussion of compensation and the FBI arrested him and charged him with violating the Mann Act by inducing a woman to cross state lines for purposes of prostitution. The FBI and US attorney felt that any form of exchange of sex for pecuniary value constituted prostitution, but the court accepted the defense’s distinction between a sugar daddy relationship and a prostitution relationship. Hence, placing this exchange in the form of a gift exchange relationship successfully mitigated the legal and moral taboo that would have been felt by both Dr. Weiner and the court in the case of explicit prostitution.



## Future Research Questions

This paper has explained how the structure of an exchange can serve as relational work to mitigate taboos that might exist were the same exchange to be achieved as an open quid pro quo. As seen in the various examples presented here, obfuscated exchanges can be found in wide-ranging substantive cases. It is my hope that this paper will be generative of empirical inquiry. At the simplest level this means understanding how these phenomena work in various substantive settings. However such investigations would not just serve to catalog events. Rather, empirical inquiry can provide analytical leverage to address various related research questions, both for the relational work concerns that are internal to the model and for its implications for broader social phenomena like market efficiency and network structure.

The most basic question we might ask is when do actors use structure to obfuscate exchange? For illustrative purposes of defining a class of social phenomena, this article has described various cases of the phenomena in question rather than treating it as a contingent response to a causally prior event or setting. If we instead start with scenarios where people desire an exchange but recognize it to be disreputable, we can appreciate that there are several options available to such people: they can simply make the exchange, disreputability be damned; they can engage in explicit moral reasoning to justify the exchange; they can obfuscate the exchange through structuring it as bundling, brokerage, or gifts; or they can forgo the disreputable exchange altogether. Criminology and deviance has tended to focus on the first class of responses, much of extant relational work on the second, this paper on the third, and the sociology of morality on the fourth (Ehrlich 1996; Granovetter 2007; Vaisey 2009; Weitzer 2009; Zelizer 1978). This emphasis of different researchers on different responses can cause us to lose sight that all of these broad categories of action are responses to the same basic dilemma: what do people do when there are gains from disreputable trade? My ordering of these responses, unapologetic transgression through apologetics then obfuscation to abstention, is deliberate, for as I will argue in the conclusion, obfuscation shares important features with outright abstention. Even if we put aside the alternative actions and focus just on structural obfuscation, we can still ask why does a particular exchange follow a particular structure? It may well be that there are affinities between certain types of taboos and the structures that most comfortably mitigate them, although such affinities must be loose as in this article we have seen diverse sorts of exchange taboos circumvented through similar structures. Likewise, the form of structural obfuscation might be shaped by more mundane issues, such as the volume of transactions engaged in by the buyer, the seller, and the dyad of the two together.

We can also ask how effectively the exchange is obfuscated, both to each of the transactants and to third-parties, and when and how this deniability breaks down.

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, for expository purposes I have talked as if actors are consciously structuring exchange but allow that their actual subjective experience may vary widely, from lucid culpability to compartmentalization or dual consciousness to fully internalizing the premise that structure legitimates the exchange (Bourdieu 2000). We might imagine that subjective understanding of the interaction as ultimately exchange will be inversely correlated with the extent to which one has internalized moral objections to it, such that evading mere illegality will tend to be characterized by winking lucidity but that when one has internalized an understanding that *quid pro quos* are immoral then structural evasion will be subjectively characterized by Bourdieu's "twofold truth." For instance, Doctor Weiner's indignant differentiation between a sugar baby and a hooker seems to have been primarily oriented towards his own self-image as someone who doesn't outright pay for sex and the legal exculpation this provided was an unanticipated windfall (Balko 2009). Similarly, transactional sex as gift exchange practices in Malawi are also subjectively understood by both men and women as courtship (Poulin 2007). Wide-ranging comparative analysis is necessary to understand under what conditions and to what extent do the parties to an obfuscated exchange subjectively understand it as an exchange and whether they even share the same understandings as their interaction/exchange partners (Glaser and Strauss 1964; Lainer-Vos 2013).

A related issue is the opinions of third parties to an obfuscated exchange. Much like the transactants themselves, third parties might internalize the understanding of the interaction as not exchange, they might perceive it as exchange but have the tact to let such an understanding be suppressed from interaction, or they might indignantly denounce it. That is, we can understand these obfuscated exchanges as analogous to stigmatized people (Goffman 1963), but with the difference that the stigma primarily applies to the interaction and only by contagious extension to the participants to it. Just as some stigmatized people can pass, or are allowed to pass, so too might obfuscated exchanges. Even if such an interaction is understood as reputable, its situation can best be understood as passing, and thus its reputability is tenuous and discreditable. An obfuscated disreputable exchange is always at risk of being understood as *essentially* a disreputable exchange. This is especially the case if a moral entrepreneur intervenes to discredit the discreditable (Adut 2008). The case of Doctor Weiner is again instructive, with the FBI aggressively investigating his sugar daddy relationships and making a serious attempt to discredit them as in essence prostitution. Similarly, since the 1940s *murabaha* has been the object of sustained critique by the "Islamic finance" movement, who discredit this legal fiction of bundling as being in essence a disreputable fixed-rate of return on the principal, notwithstanding *murabaha's* long tradition in sharia law (Kuran 2004). This effort at discrediting *murabaha* has met with widespread success and in recent decades many pious Muslims (often with the encouragement of Muslim governments) have shifted away from *murabaha* and towards equity-based finance. More broadly, we

might imagine various other situations in which reputable but discreditable obfuscated exchanges are vulnerable to denunciation by moral entrepreneurs.

Thus far, I have discussed research questions closely related to the moral drives and outcomes of the obfuscation itself, but we can also ask how obfuscated exchanges differ from other forms of exchange or other forms of social ties. First, how does obfuscating an exchange change its properties as an exchange? When an interaction can be understood in etic terms as exchange, but in emic terms is understood quite differently, this would seem to render the calculability of exchange partial, if not necessarily entirely absent (Bourdieu 2000; Callon 1998). In reputable markets characterized by extreme product differentiation there is also a problem of calculability which is usually solved through judgment devices (Karpik 2010), but to apply such a solution to obfuscated exchange would undermine the obfuscatory nature.<sup>13</sup> Scaling up from the transaction to the market implies the related question, how well are obfuscated exchanges described by price theory? As Block (2012:139) notes, nontrivial problems of information lead naturally to questions of relational work. In particular, obfuscated exchange is almost by definition a strong violation of the assumptions of perfect information and low transaction costs. These effects may vary by the structure used, so that for instance the anticipated calculation of a gift exchange's value must include not only the value of a counter-gift but the likelihood that alter fails to reciprocate and there will be no counter-gift at all (Tulloch 1967). Moreover, when exchange is not structured as market pricing it can be difficult to negotiate the terms of trade, as seen in the extreme case of villagers who found themselves unable to refuse a moocher's incessant demands until they eventually killed him (Graeber 2011:116). This implies that "markets" characterized by obfuscated exchange should not follow the predictions of economic theory as smoothly as, say, the market in soybeans. We have some suggestive but mixed evidence from other markets that nontrivially violate the assumptions of economic theory. Experimental markets with imperfect information and inexperienced traders are still remarkably efficient at reaching the predictions of theory (Smith 1962). On the other hand, narcotics are characterized by extremely furtive exchange and as a result they exhibit such anomalies as long-run violations of the law of one price (Kleiman 1992; Reuter and Caulkins 2004). Yet another case where calculability is rendered somewhat opaque is Tiebout competition (where local public services are bundled with housing) and the empirical literature on the efficiency of such markets is decidedly mixed (Brueckner 1979; Hoyt and Rosenthal 1997). Conclusively identifying the implications of obfuscating exchange for its economic efficiency is beyond the scope of this paper but most likely there is a trade-off, with taboo mitigation going up and economic efficiency going down as a function of the exchange's opacity.

Obfuscated exchange not only has implications for exchange as exchange, but also for how social interaction scales up into social networks. Network structure is shaped by the cultural meaning attached to it, as with how the general principle of

triadic closure means that A and C are likely to meet if they are both close friends of B but the same is not true if A and C are B's wife and mistress (Fuhse 2009). Whereas quid pro quo exchanges are often and ideal-typically arms-length, the reliance on tacit understandings in obfuscated exchanges should, all else being equal, lead a transactant to continue dealing with a partner who acts in accordance with the implicit terms of trade rather than risking that the next partner will be obtuse and, for instance, not reciprocate a gift exchange properly. Thus obfuscation should tend to increase repeat collaboration, a crucial issue for network formation and innovation (Guimerà et al. 2005; Uzzi and Spiro 2005). Moreover, the use of brokerage as exchange obfuscation helps explain the puzzle of how brokerage could be a stable structure over repeated transactions (Stovel et al. 2011). Thus the structural obfuscation of exchange has implications for network formation heuristics, which is significant as previous research has shown how small variations in micro-level heuristics lead to the emergence of dramatically different social structures (e.g., Bearman, Moody, and Stovel 2004; Guimerà et al. 2005; Martin 2009). Indeed, in some countries ubiquitous transactional sex is structured as gift exchange (Dunkle et al. 2004; Poulin 2007). If many women are willing to identify as the girlfriend of a generous boyfriend, but few as a prostitute, then for transactional sex to be framed as gift exchange rather than quid pro quo will rewire the network to have a higher mean and lower variance for degree among women and lower homophily between men and women for centrality, age, and seropositivity. These micro-level heuristics will scale up to dramatically different emergent network structure and public health outcomes.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed how the relational work that goes into ameliorating exchange taboos can involve not only rhetorical framing or symbolically-loaded prices as in much previous research (Anteby 2010; Quinn 2008; Velthuis 2003; Wherry 2008; Zelizer 1978), but complicated exchange structures that partially obscure the occurrence of disreputable exchange. Bundling is when actors engage in differentiated ties but cross-subsidize across the circuits. In effect, bundling allows the exchange of profane for sacred while maintaining the pretense that profane goods are only exchanged for profane and sacred goods only for sacred. Brokerage is when an intermediary handles the commensuration of profane and sacred. This allows at least one of the primary parties to the exchange to maintain the premise that no taboo circuit has been formed. Gift exchange is when reciprocity is asynchronous and/or in-kind. This allows exchange to be framed as about gifts made to express the social bond rather than as deferred compensation for earlier transfers that may or may not be legitimately directly commensurable. These uses of structure as relational work often occur in combination, as with VIP bottle service that involves both brokerage and bundling and payola that involves both brokerage and gift exchange. We even see all three forms acting simultaneously, as revealed in the divorce of Neil Bush (one of President George W. Bush's brothers) (Graeber

2011:127). Bush's trading partners sent pre-paid prostitutes to his hotel room. The sex was bundled together with the legitimate exchange, the trading partners serve as brokers who handled compensation for the sex, and the sex served as a gift to Bush that he could tacitly reciprocate through more favorable trading terms. All of this had the effect that Bush could remain agnostic as to whether he was having sex with prostitutes or was just a guy who happened to live in an alternate universe operating according to the laws of pornographic fantasy.

One interesting thing about these complicated exchange structures is that actors may arrange exchanges this way for reasons other than obfuscating taboo circuits and the multiple purposes to which these circuit structures can be applied facilitates the individual and collective denial that they are also exchange. If the only reason to structure exchanges as something other than a quid pro quo were to obfuscate transgression, this very fact would make it unsuitable for this purpose, just as a scarf over the face would make an effective disguise in the snow but would only make one look suspicious in summer. That is, the importance of alternate applications for complicated structures gives plausible deniability to suspicions that one is only using it to obfuscate transgression. Indeed, as described in their respective sections of this paper, each of these exchange structures has important applications even for reputable exchange. Bundling often lowers transaction costs or facilitates price discrimination. Brokerage can bring together primaries who have only low volume trades in the market. Gift exchange often cements social ties with the gifts themselves being incidental. The fact that these structures of exchange can serve purposes unrelated to the relational work of concealing taboo circuits allows their usage to be framed as serving these legitimate purposes which makes them more effective when actors do use them for taboo purposes. However, when obfuscatory strategies are institutionalized as routine taboo circumventions this renders them suspect, much as "good [exculpatory] accounts acquire a bad name, being exactly what quick-witted offenders would come up with were they to offer false ones" (Goffman 1971:112). Such institutionalized circumventions are not automatically useless, but they are vulnerable to discredit by hostile moral entrepreneurs, as seen in the perennial debates in Islam over *murabaha* and similar institutions (Kuran 2004).

Zelizer usually presents relational work as a more nuanced alternative to moralizing "hostile worlds" on the one hand and reductionist "nothing but" on the other (Zelizer 2000). In contrast, this paper has emphasized the ways that circuit structures can be used as relational work in a way that is not an alternative to "hostile worlds" or "nothing but," but rather that is their synthesis. Specifically, we can draw from the "nothing but" perspective that many social interactions are in an ultimate sense about exchange. Nonetheless, members of the culture perceive certain circuits as "hostile worlds" and crucially this understanding extends to the participants to the exchange themselves, who may feel constrained not only by the law and/or threat of ostracism but by their own moral commitments (Vaisey 2009).

It is exactly this contradiction between the actors' desire to make an exchange and their recognition that the exchange is taboo that sometimes leads them to engage in elaborate relational work in order to obfuscate the taboo exchange even to themselves. Doing so allows them to engage in the exchange while avoiding sanction from third parties, reproaching oneself as a taboo violator, or spoiling the premise of the interaction that the alter has non-pecuniary motives. Gifts and other structural alternatives to the quid pro quo make exchange "viable and acceptable by facilitating self-deception, a lie told to oneself, as the condition of the coexistence of recognition and misrecognition of the logic of the exchange" (Bourdieu 2000:192).

Nonetheless to say that there are structures through which we circumvent exchange taboos is not the same thing as to say the taboos don't really exist since the very act of structuring work-arounds to a taboo implies deference to its authority. "When people sneak across the boundary of the sphere of money, they advertise the existence of the boundary" (Walzer 1983:98). If we conceive of morality as a dual process between explicit moral reasoning and moral intuition then open moral reasoning to justify taboo violations does far more to undermine the taboo's long-run strength than does paying it lip service but quietly circumventing it (Haidt 2012; Vaisey 2009). We can see this most obviously in contrasting Christianity's theological justification of interest against Islam's long-standing obfuscation of interest through *murabaha*. The Reformation era Christian apologetic for interest was so successful that almost all Christians treat the taboo on interest as a mere historical curiosity whereas Islam's consistently expressed (if widely flouted) belief that in principle one may not charge points on principal has allowed the *riba* taboo to smolder and recently be stoked to a healthy flame by fundamentalist moral entrepreneurs (Kuran 2004; Nelson 1969). Hence as Rochefoucauld said, "hypocrisy is the tribute that vice renders unto virtue" and we might add that in the absence of more forthright obeisance, virtue can be sustained by this hypocritical tribute.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the relational work tradition has mostly been concerned with such issues as the commensuration of money with sexuality, death, and human tissues (Almeling 2011; Anteby 2010; Quinn 2008; Zelizer 1978, 2005), people also feel moral reservations about exploitation. Sandel (2000) describes this schema of objections as “corruption” (sacred/profane commensurations) and “coercion” (exploitation). For elaborations on taboos premised on coercion, see Munger (2011), Satz (2010), and Walzer (1983).

Note that corruption and coercion are not always clearly distinguishable, especially when we have an initial disgust reaction to sacred/profane corruption, which we justify post hoc through explicit moral reasoning about exploitative coercion (Haidt 2001). For instance, we might feel disgusted by prostitution as a transgression of sanctity but when forced to make a case against it we might articulate a harm concern about exploitation of sex workers, sexually-transmitted disease, or subjugation of women as a class. Moral philosophers in the liberal tradition often categorically reject concerns about sacred/profane commensuration for purposes of normative ethics or public policy and will only legitimate such concerns to the extent that they can be justified in terms of harm or fairness (e.g., Satz 2010). Whatever the merits of such a view as an ethical or policy principle, it is orthogonal to the empirical point that for better or worse many people do in fact feel disgust at degradation of the sacred (Haidt 2012; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The human egg markets provides an interesting case since “the fertility center staff mak[e] deliberate efforts to create a relational package that classifies the economic transaction as a gift for which donors receive compensation, rather than as direct sale of eggs” (Haylett 2012:230). The exchange is explicitly contractual and so from the perspective of this article the egg market is structurally a quid pro quo that involves code-switching to elaborate rhetorical framing as a gift. Similarly, diaspora bonds are structured as explicit contractual debt offerings (albeit with some unusual terms like contingency on achieving sovereignty), but the moral framing (i.e., ethnic solidarity) and price (i.e., failure to price-in an appropriate risk premium) play up gift framing between the diaspora creditor and the nation (Lainer-Vos 2013). As anyone who has ever seen World War II propaganda can attest, similar properties characterize war bond drives to a state’s own citizens.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the specially protected role seems to vary considerably and cannot be said to always be, for instance, “the customer” (i.e., the person who gives profane and receives sacred). In political corruption the legislator (who sells sacred legislation) probably engages in more self-deception than the rent-seeker (who

---

buys it) whereas in a '49 dance hall the hostess (who sells sacred affection) probably engages in less self-deception than the guest (who buys it). There can even be variation within a single phenomena over time, as with how in the early 1980s record executives could be naïve about payola whereas by the 1990s it was radio programmers who engaged in considerable self-deception (Ahlkvist and Faulkner 2002; Dannen 1990). The one role that seems to have fairly consistent tendencies are brokers, who by virtue of arranging the exchange are especially likely to be calculative towards it.

<sup>4</sup> There are cases where a structure can completely eliminate a taboo but this impeccable reputability is exactly what makes these cases unsuitable for expository purposes. For instance, it seems like trolling or willfully obtuse contrarianism to describe the differences between marriage and prostitution as “not fundamental” (Posner 1992:131) and even more so to proceed from that premise to describe marriage as an institution for overcoming the taboo against commensuration of sex and money.

<sup>5</sup> There are similar prohibitions in Deuteronomy, but for the last few centuries Jews and Christians have abandoned this taboo on the basis of a loophole in Deuteronomy 23:20, as well as other Biblical passages that describe interest favorably such as Matthew 25 (Nelson 1969).

Note that usury is often understood as objectionable on grounds of coercion or exploitation of those with weak alternatives (Munger 2011; Satz 2010). In this sense usury taboos deviate from my general understanding of exchange taboos as restrictions on commensuration of sacred and profane. However note that in Islamic jurisprudence, as in Thomist Christian theology and canon law, the objection to debt is often framed as one that involves a taboo commensuration which is objectionable because the creditor is understood to be getting something for nothing, and not just because the vulnerable debtor might be exploited. That is, while modern Western criticisms of debt, as seen for instance in the Occupy movement, are understood primarily with reference to exploitations of debtors, this framing is not culturally universal and the taboo against *riba* is arguably as much about commensuration as exploitation.

<sup>6</sup> Efficiency arguments for bundling would involve things like economizing on transaction costs, transportation costs, or economies of scale. For instance, in some sense a car is a bundle of parts and labor but it is more efficient to buy a car assembled at the factory than to buy auto parts and hire a mechanic to assemble them. Bundling can serve as price discrimination when a seller who wields market power can increase total revenues (and decrease consumer surplus) by pricing only



---

bundles rather than a la carte products, a frequently reoccurring business model in the entertainment industry (Crawford 2007; Elberse 2010; Stigler 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Paying news sources is an ethical issue, not a legal one. There are no laws against it and tabloids do so routinely. Likewise, in Hollywood it is accepted practice to pay the people who are dramatized in biographical films for their “life rights.”

<sup>8</sup> For instance, not only did Abramoff himself derive fees from his deals, but he sometimes delegated brokerage between the Choctaw and Reed to Grover Norquist and was upset when Norquist retained more of the money than was originally agreed upon (Continetti 2006:154; United States Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs 2006:26–29). Likewise, one of the accusations against Abramoff was that he himself exploited his clients and part of his plea agreement was to make restitution.

<sup>9</sup> The ‘49 dance hall and bottle service at contemporary nightclubs combine brokerage and bundling since payments to the broker are framed as the purchase of drinks. Pure brokerage, without bundling, would occur if the hostesses were paid out of a cover charge and the drinks were the usual price.

<sup>10</sup> My discussion of exchange in status through bundling follows Podolny's (2005) argument about status among large American firms. In other contexts (e.g., pre-modern societies), status flows through patron-client gift exchange (Martin 2009; Saller 1982; Schwartz 2010).

<sup>11</sup> “Pawning” is structurally similar to gift exchange but is framed differently, with debt being explicit in pawning but tacit in gift exchange. It is debatable whether pawning is best understood as a distinct structure or just a special case of gift exchange, but given this article’s emphasis on structure over framing I am tentatively treating pawning as a corollary form. In pawning, ego gives something of profane value (often money) to alter in exchange for an *explicit* contractual debt. (Note the explicit nature of debt in pawning is a point of contrast with the tacit obligation of gifts). Then when alter is unable to repay the debt, ego demands forfeiture of collateral, which would otherwise be sacred. In effect, one might be unwilling to sell sacred goods outright but might find it permissible to stake sacred goods as collateral and then default (Graeber 2011). It is worth noting that pawning exchanges almost always occur under conditions of desperation and the nature of the collateral reflects this. For instance, in many societies one can pawn dependents or one’s own person and then default on the insurmountable debt and fall into slavery. Subjectively this allows distinctions like those expressed by the mother of a bond slave prostitute who “claims not to have sold her daughter, but only to have accepted a loan” (Bishop and Robinson 1998:214). A more genteel form of pawning occurs when museums stake art as collateral, even though more direct routes to

---

deaccessioning are frowned upon as a violation of donor intent. Similarly, Constantinople did not simply sell the crown of thorns to France but (while under great threat from the Turks) pawned the Passion relic to Venetian bankers and then saw the bankers sell it to France when Constantinople was predictably unable to redeem the loan.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu (1990) describes delay, and the longer the better, as key to distinguishing gift exchange from quid pro quos. However careful reading shows that Bourdieu is ultimately interested in uncertainty and trust, with delay being a mechanism for making trust harder to sustain and therefore more important. Although Bourdieu is clearly correct that gift exchange *often* involves delay, there are forms of gift exchange like tipping and Greco-Roman euergetism where gift and counter-gift remain sequential but reciprocity can be immediate.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, we can imagine a “sugar daddy” website that includes reviews of past dates and even summary metrics aggregating across these dates. To the extent that this information makes salient information typical of conventional courtship it will not undermine the obfuscatory nature of the exchange. However to the extent that this information serves to render calculable tacit prices it will make the website seem more like a disreputable prostitution service and less like a reputable dating site.

## References

- Adut, Ari. 2008. *On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics, and Art*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ahlkvist, Jarl A., and Robert Faulkner. 2002. "Will This Record Work for Us?": Managing Music Formats in Commercial Radio." *Qualitative Sociology* 25(2):189–215.
- Almeling, Rene. 2011. *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Anteby, Michel. 2010. "Markets, Morals, and Practices of Trade: Jurisdictional Disputes in the U.S. Commerce in Cadavers." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55(4):606–638.
- Balko, Radley. 2009. "Feds Bust Doctor for ... Meeting Women on the Internet." *Hit & Run: Reason Magazine*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 (<http://reason.com/blog/2009/09/04/feds-bust-doctor-for-meeting-w>).
- Bearman, Peter S., James Moody, and Katherine Stovel. 2004. "Chains of Affection: The Structure of Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Networks." *American Journal of Sociology* 110(1):44–91.
- Benedict XVI. 2005. "Deus Caritas Est." Retrieved ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)).
- Bielby, William T., and Denise Bielby. 1999. "Organizational Mediation of Project-Based Labor Markets: Talent Agencies and the Careers of Screenwriters." *American Sociological Review* 64(1):64–85.
- Biscotti, Dina, William B. Lacy, Leland L. Glenna, and Rick Welsh. 2012. "Constructing 'Disinterested' Academic Science Relational Work in University–Industry Research Collaborations." *Politics & Society* 40(2):273–308.
- Bishop, Ryan, and Lillian S. Robinson. 1998. *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle*. New York: Routledge.
- Block, Fred. 2012. "Relational Work in Market Economies Introduction." *Politics & Society* 40(2):135–44.

- Bohannon, Paul. 1955. "Some Principles of Exchange and Investment Among the Tiv." *American Anthropologist* 57(1):60–70.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brueckner, Jan K. 1979. "Property Values, Local Public Expenditure and Economic Efficiency." *Journal of Public Economics* 11(2):223–45.
- Burt, Ronald S. 1992. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Callon, Michel. 1998. *The Laws of the Markets*. Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers/Sociological Review.
- Carrier, James. 1991. "Gifts, Commodities, and Social Relations: A Maussian View of Exchange." *Sociological Forum* 6(1):119–36.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 1926. *Philippics*. Translated by Walter C. A. Ker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 1967. *On Moral Obligation*. Translated by John Higginbotham. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Coase, R. H. 1979. "Payola in Radio and Television Broadcasting." *Journal of Law and Economics* 22(2):269–328.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Continetti, Matthew. 2006. *The K Street Gang: The Rise and Fall of the Republican Machine*. New York: Doubleday.
- Crawford, Gregory S. 2007. "The Discriminatory Incentives to Bundle in the Cable Television Industry." *Quantitative Marketing and Economics* 6:41–78.
- Cressey, Paul. 2008. *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dannen, Fredric. 1990. *Hit Men: Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business*. New York: Times Books.

- DiMaggio, Paul J. 1977. "Market Structure, the Creative Process, and Popular Culture: Toward an Organizational Reinterpretation of Mass Culture Theory." *Journal of Popular Culture* 11:433–51.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Dunkle, Kristin L. et al. 2004. "Transactional Sex Among Women in Soweto, South Africa: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Association with HIV Infection." *Social Science & Medicine* 59(8):1581–92.
- Ehrlich, Isaac. 1996. "Crime, Punishment, and the Market for Offenses." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 10(1):43–67.
- Elberse, Anita. 2010. "Bye-Bye Bundles: The Unbundling of Music in Digital Channels." *Journal of Marketing* 74(3):107–23.
- Fernandez-Mateo, Isabel. 2007. "Who Pays the Price of Brokerage? Transferring Constraint through Price Setting in the Staffing Sector." *American Sociological Review* 72(2):291–317.
- Fisher, Marc. 2007. *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution That Shaped a Generation*. New York: Random House.
- Fiske, Alan Page. 1992. "The Four Elementary Forms of Sociality: Framework for a Unified Theory of Social Relations." *Psychological Review* 99(4):689–723.
- Fiske, Alan Page, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1997. "Taboo Trade-Offs: Reactions to Transactions That Transgress the Spheres of Justice." *Political Psychology* 18(2):255–97.
- Freeman, Linton C. 1977. "A Set of Measures of Centrality Based on Betweenness." *Sociometry* 40(1):35–41.
- Fuhse, Jan A. 2009. "The Meaning Structure of Social Networks." *Sociological Theory* 27(1):51–73.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1964. "Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction." *American Sociological Review* 29(5):669–79.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Goffman, Erving. 1971. *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gould, Roger V. 2002. "The Origins of Status Hierarchies: A Formal Theory and Empirical Test." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(5):1143–78.
- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York: Melville House.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 2007. "The Social Construction of Corruption." Pp. 152–72 in *On Capitalism*, edited by Victor Nee and Richard Swedberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Guimerà, Roger, Brian Uzzi, Jarrett Spiro, and Luís A. Nunes Amaral. 2005. "Team Assembly Mechanisms Determine Collaboration Network Structure and Team Performance." *Science* 308(5722):697–702.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2001. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review* 108(4):814–34.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hanson, Robin. 2007. "The Policy Analysis Market (A Thwarted Experiment in the Use of Prediction Markets for Public Policy)." *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 2(3):73–88.
- Hayek, F. A. 1945. "The Use of Knowledge in Society." *American Economic Review* 35(4):519–30.
- Haylett, Jennifer. 2012. "One Woman Helping Another Egg Donation as a Case of Relational Work." *Politics & Society* 40(2):223–47.
- Henrich, Joseph, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan. 2010. "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33(2-3):61–83.
- Hirsch, Paul M. 1972. "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems." *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4):639–59.
- Hoyt, William H., and Stuart S. Rosenthal. 1997. "Household Location and Tiebout: Do Families Sort According to Preferences for Locational Amenities?" *Journal of Urban Economics* 42(2):159–78.
- Jancsics, David. 2013. *A Friend Gave Me a Phone Number: Brokerage in Low-level Corruption*.

- Karpik, Lucien. 2010. *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kleiman, Mark. 1992. *Against Excess: Drug Policy for Results*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Kolhatkar, Sheelah. 2010. "The News Merchant." *The Atlantic*, September. Retrieved August 26, 2010 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/09/the-news-merchant/8194>).
- Krawiec, Kimberly D. 2009. "Show Me the Money: Making Markets in Forbidden Exchange." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 72(3):i–xiv.
- Kuran, Timur. 2004. *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lainer-Vos, Dan. 2013. "The Practical Organization of Moral Transactions Gift Giving, Market Exchange, Credit, and the Making of Diaspora Bonds." *Sociological Theory* 31(2):145–67.
- Marsden, Peter V. 1982. "Brokerage Behavior in Restricted Exchange Networks." in *Social Structure and Network Analysis*, edited by Peter V. Marsden and Nan Lin. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Martin, John Levi. 2009. *Social Structures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1967. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.
- Molm, Linda D., Nobuyuki Takahashi, and Gretchen Peterson. 2000. "Risk and Trust in Social Exchange: An Experimental Test of a Classical Proposition." *American Journal of Sociology* 105(5):1396–1427.
- Munger, Michael C. 2011. "Euvoluntary or Not, Exchange Is Just." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 28(02):192–211.
- Nelson, Benjamin. 1969. *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pinker, Steven, Martin A. Nowak, and James J. Lee. 2008. "The Logic of Indirect Speech." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105(3):833–838.
- Plutarch. 2001. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated by John Dryden, edited by Arthur Hugh Clough. New York: Modern Library.

- Podolny, Joel. 2001. "Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(1):33–60.
- Podolny, Joel. 2005. *Status Signals: A Sociological Study of Market Competition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Polk, Charles, Robin Hanson, John Ledyard, and Takashi Ishikida. 2003. "The Policy Analysis Market." Pp. 272–73 in *Proceedings of the 4th ACM Conference on Electronic Commerce*, vol. 9. ACM Press. Retrieved November 4, 2012 (<http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=779928.779994>).
- Posner, Richard A. 1992. *Sex and Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Poulin, Michelle. 2007. "Sex, Money, and Premarital Partnerships in Southern Malawi." *Social Science & Medicine* 65(11):2383–93.
- Quinn, Sarah. 2008. "The Transformation of Morals in Markets: Death, Benefits, and the Exchange of Life Insurance Policies." *American Journal of Sociology* 114(3):738–80.
- Reuter, P., and JP Caulkins. 2004. "Illegal 'Lemons': Price Dispersion in Cocaine and Heroin Markets." *Bulletin on Narcotics* 56:141–65.
- Rossman, Gabriel. 2012. *Climbing the Charts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Saller, Richard P. 1982. *Personal Patronage Under the Early Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandel, Michael J. 2000. "What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets." *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 21:87–122.
- Satz, Debra. 2010. *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schwartz, Seth. 2010. *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Smith, Vernon L. 1962. "An Experimental Study of Competitive Market Behavior." *Journal of Political Economy* 70(2):111–37.

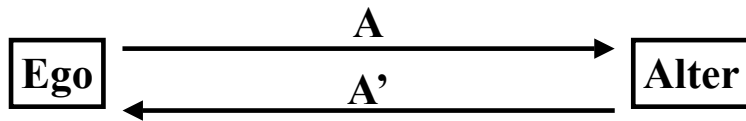


- Stigler, George J. 1963. "United States V. Loew's Inc.: A Note on Block-Booking." *Supreme Court Review* 1963:152.
- Stovel, Katherine, Benjamin Golub, and Eva Meyersson Milgrom. 2011. "Stabilizing Brokerage." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 108:21326–32.
- Stovel, Katherine, and Lynette Shaw. 2012. "Brokerage." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38(1):139–58.
- Taddeo, Lisa. 2010. "Rachel Uchitel Is Not a Madam." *New York*, April 4. Retrieved (<http://nymag.com/news/features/65238/>).
- Torgler, Benno. 2007. *Tax Compliance and Tax Morale: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Tullock, Gordon. 1967. "The Welfare Cost of Tariffs, Monopolies, and Theft." *Economic Inquiry* 5(3):224–32.
- United States Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs. 2006. *"Gimme Five": Investigation of Tribal Lobbying Matters*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Uzzi, Brian, and Jarrett Spiro. 2005. "Collaboration and Creativity: The Small World Problem." *American Journal of Sociology* 111(2):447–504.
- Vaisey, Stephen. 2009. "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action." *American Journal of Sociology* 114(6):1675–1715.
- Velthuis, Olav. 2003. "Symbolic Meanings of Prices: Constructing the Value of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam and New York Galleries." *Theory and Society* 32:181–215.
- Waldinger, Roger et al. 1998. "Helots No More: A Case Study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign." in *Organizing to Win*, edited by Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, Randolph A. Oswald, and Ronald L. Seeber. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1983. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Weitzer, Ronald. 2009. "Sociology of Sex Work." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35(1):213–34.
- Wherry, Frederick F. 2008. "The Social Characterizations of Price: The Fool, the Faithful, the Frivolous, and the Frugal." *Sociological Theory* 26(4):363–79.

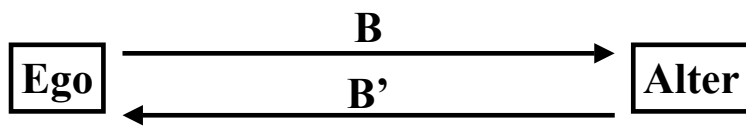
- Wherry, Frederick F. 2012. "Performance Circuits in the Marketplace." *Politics & Society* 40(2):203–21.
- Wright, Evan. 1999. "Dance With a Stranger." *LA Weekly*, January 20. Retrieved (<http://www.laweekly.com/1999-01-28/news/dance-with-a-stranger/>).
- Yandle, Bruce. 1983. "Bootleggers and Baptists -- The Education of a Regulatory Economist." *Regulation* 7(3):12–16.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. 1978. "Human Values and the Market: The Case of Life Insurance and Death in 19th-Century America." *American Journal of Sociology* 84(3):591–610.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. 1994. *The Social Meaning of Money*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. 2000. "The Purchase of Intimacy." *Law & Social Inquiry* 25(3):817–48.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. 2005. *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zuckerman, Ezra W. 2004. "Do Firms and Markets Look Different? Repeat Collaboration in the Feature Film Industry, 1935-1995."

## Figure 1: Basic Zelizer Circuits

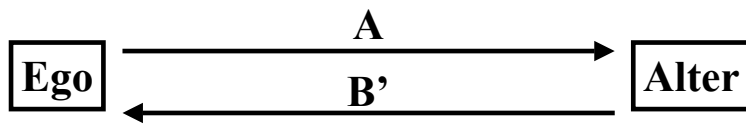
---



(a) Profane-Profane Circuit (Reputable)



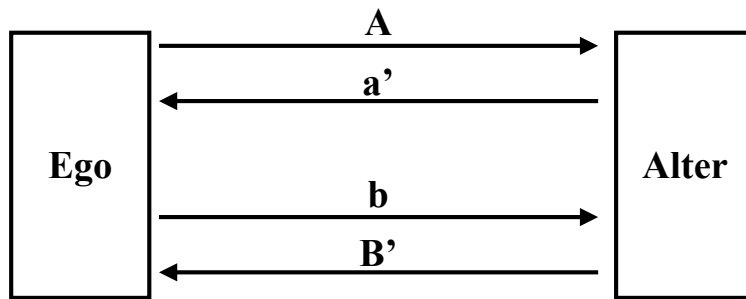
(b) Sacred-Sacred Circuit (Reputable)



(c) Sacred-Profane Circuit (Disreputable)

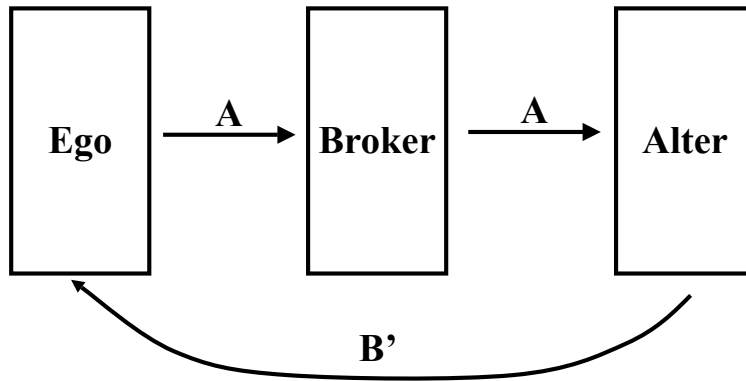
---

**Figure 2: Bundling**



---

**Figure 3: Brokerage**



---

**Figure 4: Gift Exchange**

