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# Calculating Costs or Weighing Social Relations? The Basis of the ‘Benefactive Order’ in Interaction

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## ABSTRACT

It is well-established that social actions such as suggesting and requesting—and replies to them—involve considerations of costs and benefits. For example, if I ask you a favor, I stand to accrue some amount of benefit at some amount of cost to you. This cost/benefit distribution is a quality of the future action I am requesting. But there are other “benefactive” considerations that instead concern social-relational matters. By asking a favor—and doing so in a certain way—I, for instance, imply how much right I have to benefit at your cost. This article argues that the established conception of “benefactives” as matters pertaining to a course of action should be distinguished from the socio-relational aspect of benefactive rights and obligations. Examples of people negotiating future actions are used to illustrate the argument and the interplay of benefactive and other kinds of (e.g. deontic) rights/obligations. Data are in English.

In recent years, research on how social actions are interactionally accomplished has paid increased attention to how interactants orient to their own and others’ rights and obligations. These rights and obligations are often conceptualized as distinct aspects of the moral order—that is, “the socially standardized and standardizing, ‘seen but unnoticed,’ expected, background features of everyday scenes” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 226). It has been demonstrated that the moral order plays an important role regarding the accomplishment of social actions both in terms of action formation/ascription (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson, 2022; Heritage, 2012, 2013; Hiramoto & Hayashi, 2022; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014) and the negotiation of interpersonal relations and evaluations (Baxter-Webb, 2024; Davies, 2018; Haugh, 2015; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012).

To date, four facets of the moral order—with their distinct sets of socio-relational rights and obligation—have been identified in the literature: the “epistemic” order, which pertains to “what participants can accountably know, how they know it, whether they have rights to describe it, and in what terms” (Heritage & Raymond, 2005, p. 16); the “deontic” order, which concerns people’s relative authority to determine their own and others’ actions (Stevanovic, 2011); the “affective” order, which relates to the rights and obligations to have and share subjective opinions and evaluations (Baxter-Webb, 2024), and also encompasses what Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014, p. 192) call the emotional order—that is, “the socially shared expectations regarding experiencing, expressing, and sharing of emotions”; and, finally, the “boulomaic” order, which pertains “to rights and obligations concerning a person’s having or expressing a (lack of) desire, wish, or preference” (Baxter-Webb, 2024, p. 24).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for pointing out that there is potential conceptual overlap between the affective order and the boulomaic order. I agree that both have to do with subjective inclinations and, for that reason, one may well want to subsume boulomaic rights/obligations under the affective order. However, I believe that there is an important difference between my expressing that I *like* your jumper (which I would consider a non-boulomaic, affective stance) and that I *want* your jumper.

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In interactions in which future actions are negotiated, the matter of “benefactives”—roughly the distribution of cost and benefit—has been identified as a further crucial factor for action formation and ascription (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2014; Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Heritage, 2013). Indeed, it has been suggested that “benefactives” “can be a site of complex issues of rights and responsibilities” (Heritage, 2013, p. 570) and that they constitute an additional facet of the moral order (Haugh, 2015, p. 310). Work on requests, in particular, sometimes mentions interactants’ rights to objects or services (e.g., Curl & Drew, 2008; Lindström, 2005; Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007).

However, rights and obligations related to the notion of benefit have yet to be clearly defined and set apart from other socio-relational orders, particularly deontic concerns. As is argued in Section “[Benefactives as a quality of objects, services, and actions](#)”, the matter of cost/benefit-distributions relates to (perceived) qualities of some object, service, or action—that is, to how beneficial or detrimental something is, and for whom. As this is not a matter of socio-relational rights and obligations, it is argued that it should not be the basis of the benefactive order. Section “[Benefactive rights \(and obligation\) as socio-relational concerns separate from the deontic order](#)” subsequently outlines the difference between the established notion of deontic rights and obligations, on the one hand, and the redefined domain of benefactive rights and obligations, on the other.

Overall, the benefactive order is conceptualized as (a) pertaining to socio-relational concerns rather than qualities of objects, services, or actions; and (b) pertaining to a specific set of rights and obligations which, although often variously interwoven with other kinds of socio-relational matters, can be distinguished from deontic and other types of rights and obligations. The analysis of future-action negotiations in Section “[Negotiating benefactive rights and obligations in interaction](#)” subsequently illustrates the usefulness of this proposal. Most notably, it is demonstrated that participants’ (displays of) benefactive rights and obligations do not necessarily align with (displays of) deontic rights and obligations, and that benefactive rights/obligations may variously be based on, or be the basis of, other kinds of rights/obligations (Section “[Distinguishing benefactive from other kinds of rights and obligations](#)”). The analysis in Section “[Benefactive rights and obligations as a source for interpersonal trouble](#)” furthermore demonstrates how interactants may orient to transgressions of the benefactive order as a source of interpersonal trouble.

## **From cost/benefit distributions to benefactive rights and obligations**

This section reviews the discussion and analysis of benefit-related concerns in the literature on social actions such as requests, offers, and suggestions. I henceforth use the term “proffer” as an umbrella term for this group of initiating social actions.<sup>2</sup> First, I provide a brief overview of how “benefactives” have hitherto been conceptualized, demonstrating that the notion refers to qualities or conditions of a given future action rather than socio-relational matters. Subsequently, I highlight that, although the right to have or receive some benefit is sometimes addressed within the literature on proffers, benefactive rights/obligations have yet to be clearly defined and distinguished from other socio-relational orders.

### ***Benefactives as a quality of objects, services, and actions***

The matter of cost/benefit distribution has received attention within both conversation analysis (CA) and pragmatics. In the latter field, it has been discussed in relation to (im)politeness. Leech (1983), for instance, states that future actions “may be evaluated in terms of what [the speaker] assumes to be its cost or benefit to [the speaker or hearer]. On this basis, [proffers] may be placed on a COST-BENEFIT SCALE” (p. 107). Leech also argues that increased benefit to the hearer corresponds to increased politeness. Regarding conventional forms of such social actions, Leech (1983, p. 109) furthermore observes that different formats may suggest different cost/benefit distributions, even when the future

<sup>2</sup>The term is adapted from Edmondson (1981, p. 87).

**Table 1.** Types and dimensions of proffers, taken from Couper-Kuhlen (2014, p. 634).

	Agent of future action	Beneficiary of future action
Proposal	Self & other	Self & other
Offer	Self	Other
Request	Other	Self
Suggestion	Other	Other

action being put forward remains the same. Discussing the sentences “Won’t you sit down?” and, “Can’t you sit down?” for instance the author contends that only the former “implies that sitting down is to [the hearer’s] benefit” (p. 109).

<sup>3</sup>Leech’s latter point has been explored within CA under the headings of action formation (i.e., how speakers design their talk to make it recognizable as a specific verbal action) and action ascription (i.e., how recipients understand others’ talk; see Levinson, 2013). Couper-Kuhlen (2014) demonstrates that benefactives are an important resource for both. The author found that participants in interactions distinguish four action types based on their cost-benefit distribution and the agent of the future action (see Table 1).

Building on this work, Clayman and Heritage (2014) propose the notions of “benefactive status” and “benefactive stance” to capture potential incongruities between the *de facto* benefactives of a future action (i.e., status) and the linguistically conveyed cost-benefit distribution (i.e., stance). More specifically, they define a future action’s benefactive status as

a complex of underlying conditions for the action, including such matters as whether a service will be rendered that is of actual benefit to its recipient, whether the performer of the service is able and willing to perform it, whether the cost to the performer is high or low, and whether the service is to be performed immediately (a “proximal” service) or at some later time (a “distal” service). (Clayman & Heritage, 2014, p. 58)

Notably, interactants’ rights to receive some beneficial object or service—or obligation to provide/facilitate the benefit—are not included in this definition. Instead, this conception of benefactives, which has been widely adopted in the literature (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2019; Haugh, 2015; Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2015; Jørgensen, 2023; Stivers & Sidnell, 2016), concerns qualities of a given action that are (largely) not dependent on or indicative of the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary.

Imagine, for instance, that you need a lift from your home to work. You could ask your co-habiting partner who works from home, your retired neighbor, or a colleague who lives close by. To you, the benefit of getting a lift will be the same irrespective of who you ask. To the prospective benefactors, the cost of giving you a lift may vary depending on, for instance, the time it would take them and how inconvenient it would be. Both your partner and neighbor would have to drive from your home to your place of work and then back home, assuming they do not need to go anywhere else. Your colleague, by contrast, is driving to your place of work anyway, so the cost in terms of time corresponds to only the short detour it would take to pick you up. Additional potential inconveniences for all three lift-givers might include having to change preexisting arrangements. Crucially, however, none of these factors relates to your relationship with the prospective benefactors; the cost/benefit distribution is based entirely on (perceived) external factors.

There are, of course, socio-relational concerns that may influence who (and how) you ask for a lift and, conversely, how willing the candidates might be to comply. But external benefactive qualities are different from socio-relational factors such as the right to inconvenience my partner versus my neighbor. It is therefore argued that benefactives in the sense proposed by Clayman and Heritage (2014) should not be the basis of a benefactive socio-relational order. This does not mean, however, that cost/benefit-related concern are entirely independent from socio-relational factors, as we shall see in the next section.

<sup>3</sup>Because requests and offers concern the transfer of goods or services (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014, p. 632), strictly speaking, the proffered action often involves both speaker and hearer (see also Hancher, 1979). The “agent” column therefore more accurately describes the benefactor.

### ***Benefactive rights (and obligation) as socio-relational concerns separate from the deontic order***

Citing work by Bergmann (1993), Raymond and Zimmerman (2007), and Zimmerman and Wakin (1995), Heritage (2013, p. 570) points out that “benefactives can be a site of complex issues of rights and responsibilities.” Although I agree with this assessment, there is little work examining either what exactly such benefactive rights/obligation entail or how benefactive rights/obligations are to be distinguished from other kinds of rights/obligations.<sup>4</sup> In particular, interactants’ rights to have some benefit are often discussed in relation to deontic concern. To contrast these two aspects, this section first outlines deontic rights/obligations before returning to discussions of benefactive rights/obligation in the literature. The section concludes with a proposed definition of the benefactive order as pertaining to socio-relational matters.

Within CA research on proffers, the deontic order has received considerable attention. This is because deontic authority, like Searle’s (1976) “directives” and “commissives” (e.g., requests and offers, respectively) are “about *determining* how the world ‘ought to be’ (the Ancient Greek word *deon*, ‘that which is binding’)” (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012, p. 298). Stevanovic (2011) differentiates between a person’s deontic stance and their deontic status. The former “refers to the relative strength of deontic rights claimed by the choice of the form of the utterance” (Stevanovic, 2011, p. 4)—that is, it concerns displays of deontic rights. Deontic status, by contrast, refers to “the deontic rights that a certain person *has* irrespective of whether she momentarily *claims* these rights or not” (Stevanovic, 2011, p. 4). This means that deontic stances are not necessarily congruent with a person’s deontic status. Crucially, it is through the expression—and recipients’ treatment—of deontic stances that participants’ deontic statuses are negotiated (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). Stevanovic (2015) furthermore argued that the deontic order covers two subdomains: distal and proximal. The former concerns “people’s rights to control and decide about their own and others’ future doings” (Stevanovic, 2015, pp. 85–86)—for example your relative *right to decide* that your partner will give you a lift. The latter pertains to people’s rights “to initiate, maintain, or close up local sequences of conversational action” (Stevanovic, 2015, p. 86)—for example, your relative *right to ask* your partner for a lift.

Research on future-action negotiations has shown that deontic rights are often closely interwoven with other socio-relational concerns. Studies examining treatment decisions in medical contexts, for instance, have highlighted the connection between distal deontic and epistemic rights (e.g., Lindström & Weatherall, 2015; Womack, 2013). Similarly, the proximal deontic right to make a suggestion is partially grounded in the right to know what constitutes a reasonable or necessary course of action (Baxter-Webb, 2024). The distal deontic right to decide one’s own actions, by contrast, may be grounded in the boulomaic right to (not) want to do something (Baxter-Webb, 2024).

A further point of connection appears to be the border between deontic and benefactive concerns. However, benefactive rights tend not to be clearly distinguished from deontic ones. Raymond and Zimmerman (2007, p. 34), for instance, found that “routine practices through which routine 9-1-1 calls are organized . . . embody an alignment of identities (service seeker and service provider) that allocates a set of rights and responsibilities.” The identities of service seeker and provider clearly correspond to roles of (potential) beneficiary and benefactor. The associated “set of rights and responsibilities,” however, appears to encompass multiple socio-relational domains. For instance, the authors stated, “Callers have the right to seek help for some problematic event” (Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007, p. 36). This corresponds to what Stevanovic (2015) called *proximal deontic rights*.

Elsewhere, Raymond and Zimmerman (2007, p. 44) mentioned “the caller’s right to request and receive service”; the former once again constitutes the *proximal deontic right* to do an initiating verbal action, whereas the right to “receive service” relates to the *right to receive some benefit*. Similarly, Lindström (2005) studied orientations to “entitlement” in the context of requests in interactions between senior citizens and home help providers. The object of this entitlement is variously described

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<sup>4</sup>Heritage’s (2013) own analysis of the “relationships of benefactor and beneficiary” (p. 572) examines cost/benefit-distribution as discussed in section *Benefactives as a quality of objects, services, and actions* rather than socio-relational rights and obligations.

as either the *act of requesting* (e.g., “she is institutionally entitled to request assistance,” p. 214) or the *service* she is requesting (e.g., “the requested task is one that the senior citizen clearly is entitled to,” p. 217).

In the same vein, Curl and Drew (2008, p. 135), investigating requests in phone calls between family and friends as well as out-of-hours calls to the doctors, discussed “the entitlement of the speaker to *make a particular request* of a particular hearer” (emphasis added) and “speakers’ assessment of their entitlement to the *requested object/activity*” (emphasis added). Elsewhere in their article, Curl and Drew (2008, p. 141) referred to the “entitlement to having a request granted.” This, in turn, corresponds to the *distal deontic right* to determine a future course of action.

Scholars’ use of such expressions as interchangeable demonstrates that the right to initiate a proffer sequence, the right to determine a course of action, and the right to receive some benefit can be closely interrelated. However, just as with the interplay between, for instance, deontic and epistemic concerns, I believe it is worthwhile to carefully distinguish the socio-relational bases of these various rights, precisely so we can better understand how, and in which circumstances, different socio-relational orders impact one another. To the best of my knowledge, Bergmann (1993) is the only study addressing benefactive rights/obligations as distinct socio-relational concerns, albeit briefly.<sup>5</sup> Examining calls to fire and rescue services, the author argued that (perceived) cost/benefit-distributions—and with that, the (perceived) distribution of benefactive rights/obligations—depend on who the caller is: “Callers who are not directly affected [by the emergency] act as benefactors who, by notifying emergency services, *fulfil a civic duty*. By contrast, callers who stand to personally benefit from a deployment of the fire and rescue services are in the position of beneficiaries” (Bergmann, 1993, p. 313, emphases added, translated by the author).

Put differently, people call emergency services either because they consider themselves obligated to facilitate assistance for others or because they consider themselves to (potentially) have the right to receive assistance. Bergmann (1993, pp. 313–215) furthermore found that participants particularly orient to this difference in call closings. If a caller is directly affected and emergency services are dispatched, the caller expressed gratitude toward the dispatcher. If, however, the caller is not personally affected, it is the dispatcher who thanks the caller for notifying emergency services.

It is therefore argued that it is worthwhile to differentiate between benefactive and other kinds of rights/obligations, particularly deontic ones. It is furthermore proposed that the “benefactive order” be conceptualized not as (perceived) cost/benefit distributions (as discussed in Section “[Benefactives as a quality of objects, services, and actions](#)”) but as a set of socio-relational rights/obligations. The benefactive order, defined in this way, pertains to the following matters:

- 1) Who deserves or is owed some benefit, and according to whom? This question concerns two aspects:
  - a. interactants’ relative rights to have, use, own, or receive an object, service, or benefit; and
  - b. interactants’ relative rights or obligations to (not) grant the right to some benefit.
- 2) Who owes some benefit or can be expected to provide/facilitate a benefit, and according to whom? This question concerns two aspects:
  - a. interactants’ relative obligations to provide or facilitate an object, service, or benefit;
  - b. interactants’ relative rights or obligations to (not) allocate the obligation to provide/facilitate some benefit; and
- 3) Who decides what counts as beneficial? This concerns interactants’ relative rights to determine what constitutes a benefit or detriment.

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<sup>5</sup>As previously stated, Heritage (2013) cites Zimmerman and Wakin as a further study examining benefactive rights and responsibilities. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a copy of this source.



This conception of the benefactive order therefore concerns socio-relational matters rather than (perceived) qualities of objects, services, or actions. The next section demonstrates the merit of distinguishing benefactive rights/obligations, as defined here, from other socio-relational concerns.

## Negotiating benefactive rights and obligations in interaction

This section illustrates the proposed conceptualization of the benefactive order as pertaining to relative degrees of interactants' rights/obligations to receive/provide some benefit and determine what counts as beneficial. It furthermore demonstrates the merits of distinguishing benefactive rights/obligations from other socio-relational orders. In particular, the focus is on drawing out both the differences and the interconnections between benefactive, proximal deontic, and distal deontic rights/obligations, as these are perhaps most closely interwoven.

Data were extracted from two source corpora: the subsection of face-to-face interactions in the *SPICE-Ireland Corpus* (Kirk et al., 2011) and parts 1 and 2 of the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (Du Bois et al., 2000; John W. Du Bois et al., 2003).<sup>6</sup> The latter is freely available, whereas the *SPICE-Ireland Corpus* is made available to academics on submission of an application.<sup>7</sup> Because I am interested in how future courses of actions are “negotiation,” selected interactions were limited to those containing a proffer that is not immediately accepted by the recipient. In the case of the *Santa Barbara Corpus*, the available audio recordings formed the basis for identifying relevant interactions, which yielded 48 negotiation sequences. For *SPICE-Ireland*, for which recordings are unfortunately not available, the pragmatically annotated transcripts were searched for relevant speech act tags. The resulting utterances were then examined in their wider co-text to determine whether they were indeed part of a future-action negotiation. This yielded 93 negotiation sequences.

Importantly, the aim of the subsequent analysis is purely to illustrate the viability of the proposed benefactive order as an analytical category. No quantitative claims or generalizations about the data set or source corpora are made. For the analysis, an interactional approach to pragmatic meaning was taken. This approach assumes that “particular configurations of pragmatic form(s), function(s) and context(s) are what give rise to interactional meanings, that is, what others are taken to be committing to through what they say (and don't say), and how they say it (or not)” (Haugh & Culpeper 2018, p. 221). Specifically, I examined how participants orient to different socio-relational orders by considering (a) the social actions interactants perform (e.g., a request or a refusal of a suggestion) and (b) how those social actions are performed. I begin by separating out benefactive from deontic and other kinds of socio-relational concerns (Section “Distinguishing benefactive from other kinds of rights and obligations”) before illustrating how (perceived) transgressions of the benefactive order can lead to interpersonal trouble (Section “Benefactive rights and obligations as a source for interpersonal trouble”).

## Distinguishing benefactive from other kinds of rights and obligations

As discussed in Section “Benefactive rights (and obligation) as socio-relational concerns separate from the deontic order”, the right to receive some benefit, the right to proffer a future action in the furtherance of a beneficial action, and the right to determine a future course of action can be closely interwoven. However, this does not mean that they are the

<sup>6</sup>This is part of my ongoing effort to compile a collection of interactional sequences containing future-action negotiations from various source corpora and collections.

<sup>7</sup>I would like to thank the directors of SPICE-Ireland, John Kirk and Jeffrey Kallen, for making the corpus available to me.

same or always align. This is demonstrated by means of two examples, centering around an offer and a request, respectively. Additionally, these interactions illustrate how carefully distinguishing various rights/obligations helps us better understand how, and when, different socio-relational orders are interconnected.

The extract in Example 1 occurs during a social gathering between retired women (Kallen & Kirk, 2012, p. 63) and centers around an offer of cake. The women appear to have brought food, which they are sharing with one another.

**Example 1:** “Cake,” SPICE-Ireland P1A-008<sup>8</sup>

```
01 D: Is this a nice what is this a nice cheesecake?
02 B: [1 No it's a meringue 1]
03 C: [1A wee meringue you know!]
04 B: [2<unclear several sylls>2]
05 C: [2<unclear several sylls>2]
06 D: No no Gemma thank you very no no
07 B: No excuse sorry you have to take it
```

Unfortunately, we do not know what form the initial offer(s) by B and/or C in lines 4 and 5, respectively, took. However, we know that, after an initial refusal from D (line 6), B produces an insistent re-offer. Not only does the turn-initial “no” express a blunt non-acceptance of D’s refusal, but B furthermore states that D “ha[s] to take” the cake.

What kinds of rights/obligations do D’s refusal and B’s re-offer claim, then? Let us start with the *distal deontic* order: Who has, or claims, the right to determine the course of action in question? In general, we would expect D to have a strong distal deontic status concerning whether she eats the offered cake or not.<sup>9</sup> Due to the preceding utterances being unclear, we cannot tell whether D’s noes in fact convey a strong distal deontic stance (e.g., in response to an imperative, “Have some cake”) or rather a boulomaic stance (e.g., in response to, “Do you want some cake?”). Perhaps surprisingly, however, B’s re-offer challenges the distal deontic authority one would expect D to have here. By stating that D “has to” take the cake, B expresses a strong distal deontic stance and claims the right to decide that D will eat the cake. It is noteworthy that there is no subsequent refusal from D; this suggests that she does indeed accept the cake and that, for this instance, C successfully modified their interpersonal relationship as it pertains to the distal deontic order.

Next, let us consider the *proximal deontic* order. By doing a social action, interactants tacitly and inevitably convey a certain degree of proximal deontic right (or obligation) to do so. For instance, participants may design initial proffers in specific ways to display uncertainty as to whether they are licensed to make a given proffer and, thereby, reduced proximal deontic rights (e.g., Curl & Drew, 2008; Heinemann, 2006). In the cases of both D’s refusal and B’s re-offer, we see no such uncertainty. On D’s part, the repetition of “no” and lack of dispreference features such as hesitations, hedges, or accounts (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987) tacitly conveys that D has the right to perform this social action. Regarding the interconnection of socio-relational matters, this *proximal deontic right to refuse* appears reasonably grounded in the *distal deontic right to decide her own action*, which in turn may be grounded in the

<sup>8</sup>See Appendix for transcription conventions. In the case of examples taken from SPICE-Ireland, the original pragmatic annotations and most mark-ups were removed for ease of reading. Importantly, SPICE-Ireland follows the ICE methodology, which “is geared toward standard orthographic transcriptions, with no account of prosody or indication of phonological effects other than those denoted by pauses and standard attachments of verbs and negative markers (we couldn’t, they’ve, they haven’t, etc.)” (Kallen & Kirk, 2012, p. 3). Of the SPICE-Ireland excerpts used in this article, only Example 5 originally included prosodic annotations, of which indications of emphasis were retained.

<sup>9</sup>Crucially, this is at the point of line 6, *after* cake has been offered. She may not have the same right to decide to eat the cake *before* it is offered, as we shall see later.



*boulomaic right to not want* cake. Participant B, in turn, does not accept D's refusal and furthermore designs her response in a way that treats the refusal, and its grounds, as insufficient. In other words, B claims the *proximal deontic right* to re-offer and to have the last word in the matter. B's strong *distal* and strong *proximal deontic stances* are therefore closely interwoven in line 7. But what about the proximal deontic right to initiate this proffer sequence? It is worth noting that this extract centers around an offer that appears to be made in response to D's utterance in line 1. D's question about what kind of cake it is may potentially project a subsequent request (cf., Schegloff, 2007, p. 28, 29), but none is actually produced. If, instead, D's aim in line 1 is to elicit an offer, as is the preferred response to a pre-request (Schegloff, 2007, p. 90), this suggests that D may not consider herself to have the *proximal deontic right to do a request*. By producing an offer, B/C, in turn, do potentially not only convey the *right* to do so but also take on the *proximal deontic obligation to offer* at that point.

Finally, what about the *benefactive* order? Although the cost/benefit-distribution of a future action itself is not a matter of rights/obligations, it impacts whose benefactive right and obligation interactants may orient to. In Example 1, participant D is clearly the prospective (supposed) beneficiary, whereas B and C are the benefactors. In terms of the benefactive order, then, the following questions are relevant:

- (1) Who deserves or is owed something beneficial, and according to whom?
- (2) Who owes something beneficial or can be expected to provide/facilitate a benefit, and according to whom?
- (3) Who decides what counts as beneficial?

I will address these in turn. First, who deserves to have cake, and according to whom? Obviously, the extract centers around D's having cake. This means D is the person who (potentially) deserved to have a piece of the cake in question. Importantly, however, she does not claim this right for herself; again, the fact that the cake is offered by B/C rather than requested by D is relevant. As previously mentioned, we do not know the form of the initial offer(s). However, just as the act of offering tacitly claims a certain degree of *proximal deontic right/obligation*, so, too, does it (a) *grant* the recipient *the right to some benefit* and (b) *claim the right to grant the benefit* for the speaker. The latter is acknowledged by D in the form of expressions of gratitude (line 6).<sup>10</sup> Put differently, D has the right to some cake, but only by virtue of being granted that right by her co-participants during the interaction.

Second, who can be expected to provide/facilitate the cake to D, and according to whom? Again, D herself does not orient to any *benefactive obligation to provide the cake* on the part of her co-interactants. Although it is unclear whether B or C made the meringue—and what C says in line 5—B takes on the *responsibility of facilitating the benefit* to D in line 7 (and potentially line 4) through the act of (re-)offering. Put differently, she takes it upon herself to ensure that D gets some cake, possibly considering herself obligated to do so.<sup>11</sup> The answers to Questions 1 and 2 are partially due to the situational context: a social gathering to which multiple interactants have brought food. On the one hand, ownership is a crucial determining factor as to who can (decide who gets to) have, interact with, consume, and so on an object (Dixon, 2015; Li et al., 2018; Whalen, 1995). Each woman in this situation may therefore have the right to determine whether and with whom she shares the food she has brought. On the other hand, the food appears to have been brought specifically for the purpose of sharing. There may therefore be an expectation that all interactants are equally entitled to the food.

<sup>10</sup>It is unclear to what degree D's refusal can be understood as (being grounded in) a rejection of the *benefactive right to have cake*, particularly as we do not know what the repeated *noes* are a response to. It may well be that D does not *want* any cake—or meringue, specifically—which is a *boulomaic* concern, and/or that she does not consider having cake as beneficial, which relates to Question 3 rather than Question 1 above.

<sup>11</sup>Again, it is unclear to what degree D's refusal can be understood as (being grounded in) a rejection of B's and/or C's *benefactive obligation to provide/facilitate the cake*.

Finally, who has the right to decide that having a piece of meringue would be beneficial to D? Again, B's act of re-offering and the insistent way in which she does it leaves no doubt as to whether she thinks the cake constitutes something beneficial (and desirable). B thereby claims the *right to determine what is beneficial* (and desirable) for D. This is incongruent with what we might expect the participants' benefactive rights to be. As an adult, we would expect D to have strong rights to decide whether eating cake is beneficial to her, as well as whether eating cake is desirable (i.e., *boulomaic right*) and whether she will eat cake (i.e., *distal deontic right*). Furthermore, unlike in patient–doctor interactions, C's claimed right to determine what is beneficial is not grounded in a strong *epistemic right vis-à-vis* D. Put differently, C does not have, or claim, any expertise that would allow her to make a more informed decision than D. It is worth noting that D subsequently appears to nonverbally accept the re-offer, and she does not produce any talk that would unequivocally convey that she considers having cake detrimental (or undesirable). She may therefore either agree with B's judgment, but may not consider herself entitled to claiming strong *benefactive*, or *boulomaic*, rights, or she may have forfeited her right to determine whether having cake is beneficial (and desirable) due to C's insistence. Overall, it is important to note that being the (prospective) beneficiary and having *the right to some benefit* does not necessarily equate to having the *proximal deontic right to request* the benefit or to having the *distal deontic right to determine your own and others' actions* (e.g., that they will hand over the cake and that you will eat the cake).

This nonalignment of (claimed) rights is not a feature unique to offers, however, as Example 2 illustrates. The request (for permission) sequence in this extract involves parents Jan and Frank and their son Brett, with Brett's sister Melissa as a side-participant.

### Example 2: “Staying home,” Santa Barbara Corpus SBC019

01 JAN: (H) Seven thirty=,  
 02 FRANK: ... (TSK) <P at the high school P>.  
 03 JAN: ... % There's even a guest speaker.  
 04 BRETT: ... <VOX Oh joy.  
 05 .. Do I have to go VOX>.  
 06 JAN: @@@@ (H) [1=1] [2=2]  
 07 MELISSA: [1Mom crie1] [2=s2].  
 08 FRANK: [2No=,  
 09 you can stay2] home and do your homework.  
 [...]

At the beginning of the extract, the parents are talking about a school event their daughter Melissa has coming up. This triggers their son Brett to ask whether he “has to” go in line 5. He orients to attending the event as detrimental (and undesirable), implying that not going/staying at home would be beneficial (and desirable). By asking his parents for permission, Brett furthermore orients to their being the (prospective) benefactors in the sense that the actualization of his preferred course of action depends on their consent. Overall, then, Brett's utterance in line 5 can be considered a request. The father, Frank, subsequently states that Brett does not have to go (line 8) before producing the counter-suggestion (Baxter-Webb, 2024) that Brett “can stay home and do [his] homework” instead. In doing so, dad orients to his son's staying home and doing homework as more beneficial for Brett (and desirable for dad) than Brett's staying home and, for example, watching TV.

In terms of *distal deontic rights*, Brett's request in line 5 conveys a weak stance that appears to be congruent with his status. Because he is a minor, his parents generally have a high degree of distal deontic authority over Brett's actions. This is reflected in his request for permission. Although Frank does not insist on Brett's attending the event, he expresses his strong deontic right to determine his son's actions by setting out two options: go to the event or stay home and do homework. This grants Brett a small degree of choice (i.e., *distal deontic right*), albeit limited to two potentially equally unpalatable options. Regarding the *proximal deontic* domain, by contrast, Brett does not display the

same complete lack of rights we see in the *distal domain*. His utterance is unequivocally understandable as a request to not attend the event, as we can see from dad's response. By requesting permission to not go, Brett therefore tacitly claims the proximal deontic right to make such a request. This means that Brett's distal and proximal deontic rights do not align in this instance. While he does not have, or claim, the distal right to determine to stay home, he does claim the proximal right to make a request to that effect.

In terms of the *benefactive order*, we furthermore see a negotiation of rights/obligations. According to Brett, he deserves to not attend his sister's event. According to his father, by contrast, he deserves to stay home if he does his homework instead. In other words, whereas Brett's request tacitly claims the *benefactive right to stay home*, his father's response qualifies this right. What about the *benefactive obligation to provide/facilitate the benefit*, then? As previously stated, Brett's act of requesting positions his parents as the (prospective) benefactors, as his not attending the event depends on their consent. However, while Brett clearly wants his parents to facilitate the benefit (i.e., he wants them to consent), he makes no claims as to his parents' being obligated to do so. The fact that he is requesting *permission*, and the associated distal deontic implications, is one indicator of this.

Additionally, there are no perceivable grounds for benefactive obligation on the parents' part (e.g., that it is indeed beneficial or necessary for Brett to not attend), and Brett certainly does not mention any. This means that, while Brett may hope that his parents facilitate his staying home, he does not expect them to do so. The fact that Dad does not grant Brett's request furthermore indicates that he rejects any obligation to provide/facilitate the benefit in question.

Finally, the *right to decide what counts as beneficial*—and what other socio-relational concerns this right is grounded on—is negotiated as well. Similarly to the distal deontic rights in this situation, we would expect the parents to have strong rights *vis-à-vis* their children. In other words, we expect parents to have the right to determine what is best (i.e., beneficial) for their children based on greater *epistemic* authority. In this interaction, there is no (obvious) material, objective benefit to Brett's not attending the event. The (perceived) benefit is entirely subjective and is strongly linked to a lack of desire (*boulomaic order*) on Brett's part. Put differently, staying home is beneficial to Brett because it is desirable to him. For his dad, by contrast, the beneficiality of the negotiated course of action is not a matter of what Brett wants; it appears to be a matter of how Brett can best use his time (and perhaps of what Frank wants). Although it is not clear whether Frank considers Brett's attending the event any more or less beneficial (and desirable) than Brett's staying home and doing homework, he clearly considers the latter more beneficial (and desirable) than Brett staying home and watching TV.

Overall, then, Brett's request for permission tacitly claims the *right to determine what counts as beneficial* (to him), but this claim is on unstable grounds—namely, relatively weak *boulomaic rights*. Frank subsequently challenges this right and claims it for himself by limiting Brett's options to two courses of actions that Frank considers beneficial (and desirable), neither of which caters to what Brett considers desirable and hence beneficial.

### ***Benefactive rights and obligations as a source for interpersonal trouble***

In Section “Distinguishing benefactive from other kinds of rights and obligations”, we looked at interactants' orienting to and negotiating benefactive and other types of rights/obligations without this indicating or leading to interpersonal trouble. In this section, we turn to instances in which interpersonal trouble does, in fact, occur. By “interpersonal trouble,” I mean orientations to perceived violations of rights/obligations that go beyond just the negotiation of these rights/obligations and instead amount to sanctioning a co-interactants for their (verbal) behavior (see Baxter-Webb, 2024). We will consider three examples involving (perceived) transgressions pertaining to the benefactive order. They demonstrate that proffers both can be considered a breach of the benefactive order (Examples 3 and 5) and can be the result of such a perceived breach (Example 4). Additionally, proffers other than requests can lead to interpersonal trouble pertaining to the benefactive order (Example 5).

As in the previously discussed examples, the benefactive domain is closely linked to other socio-relational concerns, but separating them out is worthwhile.

Example 3 shows an interaction in which the act of requesting is considered a transgression of the benefactive order by the recipient. The extract occurs just after a group of friends have sat down to eat.

**Example 3:** “Pepper,” SPICE-Ireland Corpus P1A-031<sup>12</sup>

- 01 A: Have you no pepper in this.  
 02 B: No and you're not putting pepper in it either.  
 03 Take a bit out and put pepper in your own bit then.  
 04 A: Don't why<sup>a</sup> you put it in that bowl anyway <, , >

The sequence begins with what B appears to understand as a request<sup>13</sup> from A, achieved by doing a “noticing” of a negatively evaluated status quo (Schegloff, 1988, p. 120–121), which conveys a complaint and the need for a remedying action (i.e., someone ought to put pepper in the dish). In response, B produces a prohibitive (line 2) followed by a counter-suggestion<sup>14</sup> to the effect that A “take a bit out and put pepper in [her] own bit” instead (line 3). According to Baxter-Webb (2024, p. 29), the unmitigated, decisive, and “non-delicate” nature of B’s utterance “challenges A’s proximal deontic right to make the request due to its cost to B as well as her tacitly claimed affective right to negatively evaluate the lack of pepper in the dish.” The author further argued that “speaker A’s response in line 4 suggests that she hears B’s refusal as problematising,” sanctioning her request. This is because A’s final utterance “escalates the [initial] complaint by focusing on B as the culprit in what can be considered ‘reciprocal impoliteness’ (Culpeper, 2011, p. 203–207)” (Baxter-Webb, 2024, p. 29).

If A’s request is treated as interpersonally problematic due to the requested future action’s “cost to B,” what does this mean in terms of *benefactive rights/obligations*? A’s initial utterance suggests she believes that she deserves pepper in the food. It also suggests—or at least is taken by B to suggest—A believes that the other people present owe this perceived benefit to A. Put differently, she is entitled to put pepper in the dish irrespective of whether this inconveniences others. Finally, A’s request also tacitly claims the right to determine that having pepper in the dish is beneficial (and desirable). B, in turn, challenges this distribution of benefactive rights/obligations. Crucially, the main transgression appears to be the presumed right to benefit either at a cost to others and/or without consideration of what others consider beneficial (and desirable). This is even though A does not claim a strong *distal deontic right to determine the future course of action* (e.g., “I’m putting pepper in this”) and does not even nominate a future action.

Such perceived selfishness and lack of consideration is also central in Example 4. Here, however, benefactive issues are what trigger a request in the first place. The interaction involves three friends; A and D are male, B is female, and all are aged 19–25 (Kallen & Kirk, 2012, p. 64). From the transcripts, it appears that A and B are housemates, whereas D is visiting.

**Example 4:** “Furniture,” SPICE-Ireland P1A-015

- 1 B: Stop doing that.  
 2 D: Why?  
 3 A: Because you're wrecking our furniture.

<sup>12</sup>It is unclear whether this is a transcription error or whether speaker A “swallowed” a “know” in between “don’t” and “why.”

<sup>13</sup>The first course of action (someone putting pepper in the dish) is treated by B as constituting benefit to A but detriment to B. This makes B the prospective beneficiary, A the prospective benefactor, and B’s utterance a request (see Baxter-Webb, 2024).

<sup>14</sup>B remains the prospective beneficiary, but there is no detriment to A (see Baxter-Webb, 2024).

Although we do not know exactly which kind of behavior on D's part B and A are referring to in this extract, they clearly disapprove of it. While B's initial request tells D to "stop doing that," A specifies the reason: D is "wrecking" their furniture. Clearly, then, D's actions are perceived as detrimental to B and A, whereas D's stopping those actions would be beneficial to them.

Generally, we would expect D to have relatively strong *distal deontic rights to determine his own actions* compared to his co-interactants. B's initial imperative request, however, claims strong distal deontic rights over D's actions. In response, D asks for a justification. Such pre-second insert expansions "ostensibly ... establish the resources necessary to implement the second pair part which is pending" (Schegloff, 2007, p. 106). Here, D's "why" appears to orient to some (perceived) issue concerning B's request—namely, that it (potentially) lacks sufficient grounds. This frames B's utterance as a potential transgression regarding (at least) the *proximal deontic domain* (i.e., doing the request) and the *distal deontic domain* (i.e., doing the request via an imperative). Put differently, D challenges B's rights to make the request and to make it in the way she did. Participant A, in turn, defends B's verbal behavior by pointing out the detriment D's actions are causing to both A and B. In doing so, A conveys that B's strong *proximal and distal deontic stances* are grounded in a strong *benefactive right to not have their furniture damaged*. As in Example 1, the matter of ownership is crucial here. B's initial request, then, orients to and is triggered by a perceived transgression on D's part concerning the benefactive order. Moreover, all three turns sanction the addressee for their (linguistic) behavior.

Transgressions pertaining to the benefactive order are not limited to requests, however. As Example 5 illustrates, the act of offering can also lead to interpersonal trouble related to benefactive rights/obligations. The extract shows an interaction between A, a female student aged 19–25, and her mother B (Kallen & Kirk, 2012, p. 80).

#### Example 5: "Treat," SPICE-Ireland P1A-060

01 B: How about a treat. [Do you want ] a fag.  
 02 A: [ What. ]  
 03 No I will not take a cigarette. I have given up cigarettes.  
 04 No way. It's a [hard choice ] but I've managed it.  
 05 B: [So have I. ]  
 06 A: No I've managed it now.  
 [...]

In line 1, B proffers to supply her daughter with a cigarette. The involved transfer of the object from B to A in and of itself facilitates an understanding of this action as an offer—that is, as involving the speaker as the benefactor and the addressee as the beneficiary (Baxter-Webb, 2024; see also Couper-Kuhlen, 2014, p. 634). This is also conveyed through the content and form of B's utterance. First, B describes the proffered good as a "treat," suggesting benefit for A; second, she uses the "do you want" format, which has been found to be typical for offers (e.g., Barron, 2005; Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). Overall, this suggests that B considers having a cigarette to be beneficial for A in some way.<sup>15</sup> Given people's general awareness of the negative effects of smoking on the body, we can assume that the perceived benefit is grounded in satisfying a perceived desire. The offer furthermore grants A the *benefactive right of having a cigarette* from B but does not claim strong *distal deontic rights* to determine whether A smoke a cigarette or not.

A's response in lines 3, 4, and 6, shows some similarities with but also differences from the offer refusal we saw in Example 1. On the one hand, both take rather decisive positions; here, this takes the form of "no (way)" and "I will not take a cigarette." On the other hand, the refusal in Example 1 conveyed appreciation for the offer of cake, which is not the case here. Instead, A's accounts to the

<sup>15</sup>If this were not the case, we would have to consider B's utterance a threat.

effect that she has “given up cigarettes,” despite it not being easy, treat the offered object as not beneficial. This, in turn, challenges the mother’s *proximal deontic right to make the offer* in the first place and orients to underlying transgressions pertaining to the *epistemic* and *benefactive orders*. While A has primary access (Heritage, 2013) to the knowledge that she has stopped smoking, it seems likely that her mother is aware of this as well. In fact, B does not react to this as new information (e.g., with a change-of-state token (Heritage, 1984) or news-marker (Gardner, 1998)). The mother may therefore have some degree of *epistemic obligation* to know that her daughter has stopped smoking and that she therefore may not want a cigarette. This, in turn, means that B violates her *benefactive right/obligation* to determine what constitutes a benefit or detriment. What is striking is that this interpersonal trouble occurs despite B’s not claiming any *distal deontic* authority over A’s actions. Unlike Examples 3 and 4, then, the transgression does not relate to the question, “Who deserves some benefit at whose cost?” but to, “Who decides what counts as beneficial?”

## Discussion and conclusion

Building on existing work on “benefactives,” on the one hand, and various interpersonal rights/obligations, on the other, this article proposes a conceptualization of the benefactive order as a set of rights/obligations that is distinct from other socio-relational orders. As outlined in section [From cost/benefit distributions to benefactive rights and obligations](#), the distribution of cost and benefit involved in some action has hitherto received significant attention. *Benefactive rights/obligations*, by contrast, have been relatively understudied and underdefined. Although Heritage (2012, p. 570), for instance, asserted, “Benefactives can be a site of complex issues of rights and responsibilities,” he did not specify what exactly those are. Others, who have referred to participants’ rights to objects or services, have not drawn a clear distinction between this and deontic concerns (e.g., Curl & Drew, 2008; Lindström, 2005; Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007). This article therefore proposes that the benefactive order be conceptualized not as pertaining to cost/benefit-distributions but as rights/obligations concerning three questions:

- (1) Who deserves or is owed some benefit, and according to whom?
- (2) Who owes some benefit or can be expected to provide/facilitate a benefit, and according to whom?
- (3) Who decides what counts as beneficial?

The advantages of this proposal were illustrated in section [Negotiating benefactive rights and obligations in interaction](#). The analysis showed that the benefactive order encompasses several different rights/obligations. In Example 1, for instance, the offer-recipient was positioned as having the *right to receive the benefit*, but the (re-)offer-producer claimed the *right to grant that benefit* and the *right to decide what counts as beneficial*, as well as taking on the *responsibility of facilitating the benefit*. We also saw that benefactive rights/obligations may be (perceived to be) violated either in relation to Questions 1 and 2, (Examples 3 and 4) or in relation to Question 3 (Example 5). The analysis also showed that it is worthwhile to treat benefactive socio-relational matters as separate from other orders, particularly the deontic one. First, these various rights/obligations do not always align; having, claiming, or being granted the *right to some benefit* does not necessarily come with the *distal deontic right to determine a course of action* or the *proximal deontic right to proffer a course of action*, and vice versa (Examples 1 and 2). Second, separating out these different facets provides us with a clearer picture as to how rights/obligations pertaining to one socio-relational order may be grounded in rights/obligations pertaining to a different order. Although the interconnectedness of various socio-relational orders is not a new observation, a clear distinction of benefactive from other socio-relational concerns contributes to our understanding of the organization of social actions. This may be valuable for future work on not just action formation/attribution but also interpersonal relations and evaluations.



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Appendix

*Transcription conventions for SPICE-Ireland extracts (Kallen & Kirk, 2012)*

.	End of utterance as defined by SPICE-Ireland project; usually corresponds to sentence or clause
<,>	Untimed pause, subject to original transcriber's judgment
<,>	Untimed long pause, subject to original transcriber's judgment
word	emphasis
[1 1]	overlapping talk
[1 1]	

*Transcription conventions for Santa Barbara Corpus (Du Bois et al, 1993)*

.	Final intonation contour
,	Continuing intonation contour
[1 1]	
[1 1]	Overlapping talk
(H)	Audible inhalation
(TSK)	Alveolar click
@	Syllable of laughter
%	Glottal stop
=	Lengthened syllable
<P P>	Soft speech
<VOX VOX>	Special voice quality
...	Medium pause (ca. 0.5)