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## Balancing Competition and Cooperation

Verbal Etiquette Among Maine Lobstermen

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*ABSTRACT* Maine lobstermen are competitors in a fishery in which one person's catch is likely to reduce the catch of others. They are also often neighbors and friends intertwined in a complex web of social ties. Balancing the inherent competition of the industry with the need for cooperation often requires delicate interactions. This paper examines some of the verbal etiquette used by lobstermen in two Maine lobstering communities to maintain this balance. It focuses on two types of interactions. The first is the management of information during radio conversations. The second type of interaction involves explanations of differences in success. Both of these types of interactions reflect the particular balance between competition and cooperation characterizing different social situations.

"Well Barney, I'm headed in."

"That's right Fred, we won't be far behind."

- Radio Conversation between two "Southern Harbor" lobstermen.

### Introduction

Conversations like the one given above are common occurrences on the VHF radio frequency used by the lobstermen in a small harbor on the southern part of the Maine coast which I will refer to as "Southern Harbor" (see Palmer 1989, 1990). It is simply a conversation between two lobstermen as they prepare to return to the harbor after a day of lobster-fishing. The only complicating factor is that neither of the lobstermen is named Barney or Fred. There is nothing particularly unusual about the use of nicknames, but the use of "Fred" and "Barney" in the radio transmissions of Southern Harbor lobstermen is part of the verbal etiquette involved in a delicate balance between competition and cooperation.

Maine lobstering like many commercial fisheries, involves characteristics of a common property, or at least a "communal property," resource (see Wilson and Acheson 1980; Wilson 1975; Acheson 1987). Usually all of the lobstermen from a given harbor compete for the lobsters in a small territory, and most lobsters are caught shortly after reaching legal size (Wilson and Acheson 1980; Acheson and Reidman 1982; Acheson 1975). The lobstermen's view that one person's catch is at the expense of the other people lobstering in the same territory is therefore fairly accurate (Acheson 1975, 1987). Lobsters are also usually found in only certain areas, and remain in one location long enough for competitors to move traps into the area (see Wilson and Acheson 1980; Martin and Lipfert

1985). In this situation, one individual's success is not only likely to lessen someone else's, but success can be greatly increased by gaining knowledge of where and when others are successful. This makes the economic competition between lobstermen a social phenomenon as well. Social interactions that provide useful information to competitors are economically disadvantageous to the provider of the information. Interactions that hinder competitors, on the other hand, are economically beneficial. Hence, other researchers have given sound economic reasons for the fact that the suspiciousness and secretiveness of Maine lobstermen are "legend all along the coast" (Wilson and Acheson 1980:246; see also Acheson 1975; Stuster 1978).

Another reason that the competition of Maine lobstermen must be seen as a social, as well as economic, behavior is because the lobstermen of a community "measure themselves against one another in determining success and skill" (Acheson 1988:49). For some lobstermen, particularly the more successful lobster catchers in a harbor (usually referred to as "highliners"), this social aspect of competition may become primary. Acheson states that

For these men, fishing is not just a way to make a living. They strive to beat the others and avoid being beaten by them (1988:54).

Acheson also points out that this social aspect of competition causes men to fish in inclement weather and do other "things they would not otherwise consider" (ibid.:54).

While the competition between lobstermen may sometimes become "vicious," there are also counteracting social forces at work in lobstering communities. Maine lobstermen typically live in small coastal communities dominated by a few well-established families and possessing a strong sense of community identity (see Acheson and Lazarowitz 1980; Lazarowitz and Acheson 1980). In such a social environment, fishermen are dependent on each other for more than just information, materials, labor, and rescues. Byron's description of Shetland fishing society also applies to many Maine communities:

*Fishermen of different crews and their families ashore interact not only in the context of fishing, but also in other social fields involving a wide range of face-to-face exchanges . . . People who are competitors and rivals in fishing may be helpmates and allies in other social settings. These crosscutting ties ensure that the relations between crews, and within them, are tempered by a comparatively broad range of mutual interests and interdependencies. The maintenance (sic) of these intricate networks of interdependencies requires careful management and diplomacy (Byron 1988:14; see also Acheson 1988; Löfgren 1989).*

Just as the primarily economic competition among lobstermen has social aspects, the cooperative social interactions between lobstermen may also have economic repercussions. As previously mentioned, cooperating with a competitor in a way that helps him catch more lobsters may entail some type of economic sacrifice. This paper examines the verbal etiquette used by Maine lobstermen

to diplomatically balance competition and cooperation in two types of interactions: information management during radio conversations, and explanations of differences in success. It will compare these types of interactions in two Maine lobstering communities with different social and ecological conditions. This comparative approach will be used to help identify some of the more specific conditions that promote either competition or cooperation among lobstermen.

### The Study Sites: Middle Harbor and Southern Harbor

Although it is located in the rapidly growing southern part of the state, Southern Harbor remains a quiet fishing village where most of the lobstermen come from families that have been in the area since the 1870s (see Palmer 1989, 1990). These lobstermen have managed to maintain a nearly "perimeter-defended territory" with almost no overlap with fishermen from other harbors until well off-shore (see Acheson 1975, 1987). One reason for this success in territorial defense is the fact that Southern Harbor is located on a section of Maine coast characterized by relatively straight sand beaches. This is in stark contrast to the convoluted pattern of narrow peninsulas and inlets that form the vast majority of Maine coast line. Such an irregular coast line makes territorial defense difficult because of the conflict resulting from up-river and down-river lobstermen attempting to gain access to fishing areas outside of the inlets (see Acheson 1975, 1987). The ocean bottom of Southern Harbor's territory is also unusual for Maine in that it is largely sand. However, over 75 per cent of the lobster traps in the territory are on the areas of rocky bottom. Traps are usually set as "singles" (one trap per buoy) in the shallower areas and "doubles" (two traps per buoy) in the less congested deeper waters. Longer trawls of traps are prohibited in the Southern Harbor territory by the Department of Marine Resources (D.M.R.). The full-time lobstermen in the area fish between seven hundred and one thousand traps.

The vast majority of full-time lobstermen in Southern Harbor are well-known to each other. Most of them attended the same school system and belong to the same church and fraternal organizations. There has also been little change in the number of lobstermen in Southern Harbor over the past fifteen years. In fact, the number of lobstermen fishing out of Southern Harbor decreased from thirty-two in 1988 to twenty-eight in 1989, and only fifteen of these were full-time lobstermen. All of the Southern Harbor lobstermen use the same radio frequency, and they are the only lobstermen in this part of Maine who use this frequency.

The second study site, which I will refer to as "Middle Harbor," is a major tourist area located near the middle of Maine's coast line approximately 80 miles by car from Southern Harbor. The harbor lies in a small inlet between two peninsulas and the territory includes numerous islands and large areas of rocky ocean bottom. Middle Harbor has only a "nuclear defended area" (see Acheson 1975, 1987) with much of its territory overlapping with the territories of one or more harbors located on the nearby peninsulas. While the lobstermen of each harbor typically use their own radio frequency, the frequencies of the other harbors are known and can be easily listened to. Trawls of five to ten traps are used extensive-

ly in the Middle Harbor territory except in one small cove where they are prohibited by the D.M.R. Typical full-time Middle Harbor lobstermen also fish between seven hundred and one thousand traps.

Middle Harbor also has its core of lobstermen descended from families living in the area for generations. However, Middle Harbor is also now fished by over fifty full-time lobstermen and over twenty-five part-timers during the summer months. The significance of this difference in the number of lobstermen was revealed when I asked one well-established Middle Harbor lobsterman if he knew all of the lobstermen there. He replied, "I make it my business to know them all." The fact that knowing one's competitors, even if it is just their names, requires considerable effort in Middle Harbor is in contrast to Southern Harbor where nearly all of the lobstermen have known each other since childhood.

These differences should have important implications for social interactions such as radio conversations. Compared to the lobstermen in Southern Harbor, those in Middle Harbor are competing with nearly four times the number of full-time lobstermen from the same harbor, and additional lobstermen from neighboring harbors with whom they are likely to have only a few, if any, social relationships (see Acheson and Lazarowitz 1979; Lazarowitz and Acheson 1979). Thus, there are many more competitors with whom they have little or no contact. In Southern Harbor, however, many or even most of the competitors are also friends intertwined in a web of social relationships based on kinship, residence, and a number of civic, religious, and recreational activities. To the extent that these differences in social organization influence information management, the lobstermen of Middle Harbor should be much more reluctant to share information on the location of lobsters in radio transmissions than are the lobstermen of Southern Harbor.

### Radio Communication

On the basis of only economic considerations, the competitive nature of the Maine lobster fishery should be manifested in extreme secrecy and deceit during radio communications. This is because studies of information sharing in other fisheries have found that information is particularly valuable to competitors when it concerns a prey species that is concentrated in a small area (Gatewood 1984b; Orbach 1977; Stiles 1972) and likely to stay in that area for an extended period (Wilson and Acheson 1980; Acheson 1988; Acheson et al. 1980; Forman 1967; Stuster 1978). Not only do lobsters fit these criteria, but there is also only limited opportunity to visually verify information on catch success in a particular area (see Stiles 1972; Andersen 1979, 1980; Orbach 1977). This gives lobstermen many opportunities to conceal or distort information about where they are catching large numbers of lobsters.

Acheson (1988) reports only three situations in which open and honest information sharing should occur. These are exchanges between close kinsmen, reciprocal exchanges with individuals who can provide at least equally valuable information, and the giving of information in exchange for future support in

attempts to gain leadership roles within the "harbor gang" (see Acheson 1988:57). However, all of these exceptions require that the information given be privately received by a specific individual selected by the transmitter (see Ball 1968). Radio transmissions, in the absence of secret codes or frequencies, are public communications that make information available to a large number of unselected receivers who can benefit from the information at the transmitter's expense (see Andersen 1972, 1973, 1980, 1982; Stiles 1972; Andersen and Stiles 1973; Tunstall 1962; Martin 1979; Davenport 1970; Goodlad 1972; Orbach 1977; Stuster 1978; Gatewood 1984b; Orth 1987; Byron 1988). Hence, to the extent radio transmissions among Maine lobstermen are determined by economic competition, they should be dominated by secrecy and/or deceit.

To test if these factors actually produced radio communications characterized by secrecy and deceit, I coded over fifteen hundred radio conversations made by lobstermen in the two Maine harbors. Radio communications were observed and coded in Southern Harbor during 1988 and in both areas during 1989. Four hundred and forty-two Southern Harbor conversations were coded on 36 days between 3 June and 19 August 1988 (see Palmer 1990). Another 503 Southern Harbor transmissions were observed during 44 days between 3 June and 12 September 1989. All of the Southern Harbor observations were made while working as a sternman on a lobster boat in Southern Harbor. Once or twice a week during the 1989 study period I would also travel to Middle Harbor and observe radio communications. I observed and coded 565 transmissions during 16 days in Middle Harbor. The Middle Harbor transmissions were observed as either a passenger on a local lobster boat or from a ground location on one of the peninsulas extending into the Middle Harbor territory.

The transmissions were first divided into those that contained information about the location of lobsters (in the form of catch size reports) and those that did not. Reports containing information about the location of lobsters were further divided into positive and negative reports. Positive reports were those that indicated the presence of lobsters in numbers that were greater than the typical catches that had been occurring. Reports consisted of either the number of lobsters caught in an area, an average number of lobsters caught per trap, or customary expressions (see Löfgren 1972). The customary positive expressions were "a few," "better," "not bad," and "some"; while the typical negative expressions were "nothing," "terrible," and "poor."

There were many similarities in the format and content of radio conversations in the two areas. While a majority of lobstermen were heard on the radio in both areas, well-established lobstermen were much more frequent radio users (see Palmer 1990). In terms of information management, however, there were striking differences. The radio conversations in Middle Harbor met the expectations of secrecy and deceit that would appear to be the best competitive tactic (see also Löfgren 1972). Only 51 (9.0 per cent) of the 565 radio conversations coded in Middle Harbor included any reference to catch sizes. Further, only 11 (1.9 per cent) of the conversations included a positive report about catch sizes that would be of particular value to competitors. Not only were positive reports about lob-

sters rare, these positive reports were quite unenthusiastic except for one exception discussed below. The only time I was able to clearly evaluate the honesty of a Middle Harbor transmission occurred on a day when the skipper of the boat I was on had just told me he was experiencing the best fishing of the year. When he was asked over the radio "if there were any lobsters?" he responded "No, it's terrible; nothin', absolutely nothin'."

Evidence of more cooperation in the radio communications among Southern Harbor lobstermen was found during studies in both 1988 (see Palmer 1990) and 1989. While there was some evidence of moderate underreporting of catch sizes, and an increasing vagueness in catch reports when an abundance of lobsters made information particularly valuable, the evidence did not support predictions of extreme secrecy and deceit. During 1988, 216 (48.9 per cent) of the 442 transmissions included references to catch size. There were also 54 (12.2 per cent) positive reports of lobsters in specific areas. The conversations coded during 1989 supported the 1988 results. Reports on the location of lobsters were included in 224 (44.5 per cent) of the 503 conversations and 52 (10.3 per cent) of these conversations included positive reports. Perhaps the clearest evidence that this radio information provided useful information in Southern Harbor is the fact that the skipper of the boat I worked on based eleven trap movement decisions during the two study periods explicitly on radio information. The following conversation from 2 August is a typical example of the apparently non-economical information sharing between two of the more frequent users of the radio in Southern Harbor (all names are pseudonyms):

"Anything inside there, John?"

"Nothing on the edges, but we had a pound to a trap between the islands."

"Gee, that's good news. We haven't done anything down here."

Table 1 illustrates the different ways information is managed in the two harbors. Despite the one observed example of deceit, secrecy clearly dominates radio communication in Middle Harbor as information about the location of lobsters is only mentioned very rarely on the radio. Such a secretive tactic can be seen as simply an attempt to maximize economic gains while avoiding the conflict that could result from being caught giving deceptive information on the radio. Instead of secrecy, at least some of the Southern Harbor lobstermen follow a tactic in which they routinely provide useful information on the radio. I suggest that this tactic of sharing information with some potential economic value goes beyond mere conflict avoidance, and may be a means of promoting close social ties between some of the competing lobstermen (see Palmer 1990). Some of the interaction patterns and subtle verbal techniques used to maintain the different balances between competition and cooperation in the two harbors will now be described.

Table 1. Number of Each Type of Transmission in Southern Harbor and Middle Harbor.

	Non Catch	Negative Catch	Positive Catch	Total
Southern Harbor 1988	226 (51.1%)	162 (36.7%)	54 (12.2%)	442 (100%)
Southern Harbor 1989	279 (55.5%)	172 (34.2%)	52 (10.3%)	503 (100%)
Middle Harbor 1989	503 (89.0%)	51 (9.0%)	11 (1.9%)	565 (99.9%)

#### *Verbal Etiquette: Indirect Questions and Evasive Answers*

Andersen (1979) found that the transmissions of deep-sea trawlers took the form of extended monologues in which numerous questions are imbedded. This form of communication allowed the receiver to ignore certain requests for information without being overly obvious about the evasion. This is in contrast to the short transmissions of Maine lobstermen that typically consist of only a single statement or question. However, the directness of inquiries about the location of lobsters still varies.

As illustrated in the previous example, conversations about the location of lobsters in Southern Harbor are usually quite direct. References to catch success in Middle Harbor are both less frequent and usually less direct. This indirectness gives the receiver more room for evasion. A typical Middle Harbor inquiry about catch success begins with the question: "So, how's it goin' today?" Although all of the lobstermen are aware that this question is usually followed by a report on the number of lobsters caught, it is occasionally answered with other information such as: "Not bad, there's not much wind."

A receiver of even the most direct inquiry about catch success still has socially acceptable options to minimize the amount of information he gives. The most commonly used information management technique is to use a jargonistic qualitative response such as "terrible," "not much to it," "not too bad, nothing great," or "a little better I guess." Ten of the eleven positive reports in Middle Harbor consisted of standardized and unenthusiastic responses. Another socially acceptable evasive tactic, used in seven of the eleven Middle Harbor responses, is to give little or no information on location. Southern Harbor reports, in contrast, nearly always included the location in which the lobsters were being caught. For example, on 11 August 1989 one lobsterman pinpointed his report of four or five lobsters in each of four or five traps "right between the islands." This information is sufficient to allow any of the other lobstermen to find the string of traps denoted in the conversation.

However, even Southern Harbor lobstermen have their limits. This is illustrat-

ed in the following conversation that occurred right at the beginning of "shedder season" in 1989 when the lobstermen were eagerly awaiting the appearance of concentrations of lobsters:

"Ain't much to it, is there John?"

"Yea, its pretty bad alright. Although I did hit one hot spot. I had six in one trap, and the other four [traps] around it had one [lobster] each."

"Gee, where was that?"

"The island."

The "island" in question (actually two islands close together) makes up a major sub-area of Southern Harbor's territory. Some lobstermen may have nearly half of their traps somewhere around the island. References to location almost always specify which side of the island (i.e., "westward," "eastward," "front," "back," or "in between"), and often specify the distance from the island (i.e., "in close," "out on the edges"). By only answering "the island," the lobsterman did not explicitly refuse to reveal the location of his hot spot, but he revealed it in a way that provided no useful information. In so doing, he avoided being obviously selfish and uncooperative, but he also avoided an economic loss the next time he hauled his traps in the "hot spot." Interestingly, this conversation was reversed between the same two lobstermen nine days later when the other lobsterman reported seven lobsters in one trap. When asked about the location, he also replied "the island." These two conversations were the only examples of evading a direct inquiry about the location of lobsters that I observed in Southern Harbor.

When an inquiry into the abundance of lobsters in a location is given, the asker almost invariably reciprocates in both Harbors. I have only recorded two instances, both in Southern Harbor, in which this did not occur. Hence, to ask someone about the location of lobsters implies that you are willing to give some information. While this might give the appearance of a simple reciprocal exchange, it must be remembered that many other competitors are "listening in" to receive the information without reciprocating anything. This is why I suggest that the important entity being exchanged is not information *per se*, but the communication of a willingness to sacrifice for the other person.

#### *Verbal Etiquette: Jokes*

Many of the radio conversations of Maine lobstermen involve humor (see Van Winkle 1975; Brown 1985). Some of these "jokes" concern exaggerated reports about the number of lobsters being caught (see also Andersen 1973). Robert Paine (personal communication) has pointed out that these are similar to the tall-tales, known as "cuffers," told by Newfoundland fishermen. Both of these types of verbal interaction involve the detection of falsehoods and may be a means of promoting social relationships by drawing attention to the depth of knowledge that the participants have about each other (see Faris 1966, 1970).

The following example from Southern Harbor is typical:

"How is it down there?"

"Oh we're ass deep in them!"

"Yea, and they're green and spiny, right?"

"Yea, that's right."

This joke was successful because the lobsterman was able to correctly guess that the positive report referred to "green and spiny" sea urchins instead of lobsters. Perhaps the most successful joke occurred when a Middle Harbor "highliner" responded to the question "How they look?" with "They look real good." After a moment of stunned silence, the inquirer figured out that the "highliner" must be on the radio back at the store at the fishermen's co-op and responded with "You must be looking at those candy bars [in the store]." The "highliner" confirmed the joke with "Yea, that's right." The key to such jokes is that they use acceptable jargon and involve just the right amount of overstatement. Too little exaggeration keeps the joke from being recognized as a joke, too much exaggeration makes the joke too easy to detect. Hence, how extreme a positive report has to be in order to make a successful joke depends on what the typical reports are in a harbor. The statement that "they look real good" only made a successful joke in Middle Harbor because they are normally so secretive about any degree of catch success. That response would not be detected as a joke in Southern Harbor because that exact expression was often used to describe catches when no joke was intended. Hence, a joke in Southern Harbor required a much more extreme statement such as "we're ass deep in them."

#### *Verbal Etiquette: Transgressions*

The norms of radio usage are also revealed in instances when they are transgressed. In some cases lobstermen will show their disapproval of a radio conversation by clicking their microphone buttons or, to express more extreme outrage, giving the offenders "the diesel" by placing their microphone next to the engine. However, these reprimands are typically reserved for non-lobstermen. The most energetic use of these tactics that I have observed was directed towards two women traveling on yachts who had an extended radio conversation about the hardships of being without tonic water. The transgressions of lobstermen concerning the proper norms of information management are met with more complex types of reprimands.

The Middle Harbor norm of secrecy appeared to have been violated when a relatively new lobsterman reported that he had been catching 20 to 30 lobsters in a "string" (five to ten traps). Such fishing would be very good for that time of year, but not unreasonable. His tone of voice also indicated that he intended it as a non-joking communication. Before the lobsterman he had called could respond, the highliner who made the candy bar joke quoted above broke in with the following call to another highliner: "I don't believe that for a minute, no-

body would say anything if they were catching lobsters like that." I suggest that this was an indirect reprimand of the new lobsterman to avoid a precedent of information sharing that the highliner was not willing to follow. At least this is the effect it had, since the original lobstermen never finished their conversation.

As secretive as the Middle Harbor lobstermen are on the radio, their competitive tactics are still subject to a certain cooperative etiquette. Not only are statements censored that share too much information, but so are statements that make their competitive secrecy too obvious and unsocial. The risk of such a transgression increases whenever there is deviation from the normal jargon of exchanges. For example, one Middle Harbor lobsterman was asked if he had "seen" any lobsters that day. He immediately answered, "Yea, I see one right now in my trap." His tone of voice suggested that he was attempting to be witty, but the silence that followed indicated that he had not been successful. He evidently realized that his response might have been taken as an offensive evasion of the question. Hence, he quickly added "No Bob, we haven't done nothin', its been terrible." The quick retreat to customary jargon smoothed over the situation even though no useful information had been given. This is another example of the fact that Middle Harbor radio communication appears to be aimed at avoiding conflicts without having to sacrifice any information.

#### *Fred and Barney*

The importance of cooperation among Maine lobstermen, and the importance of including this fact in explanations of lobstermen's behavior, is illustrated by the apparently non-economical sharing of information found in Southern Harbor. Instead of focusing on Southern Harbor lobstermen as an uniform group, an understanding of this altruism requires a focus on the unique relationships between individuals in Southern Harbor (see Chiaramonte 1970).

During the first year as a sternman on a lobsterboat in Southern Harbor, I noticed that numerous radio transmissions were directed to "Fred" or "Barney." It soon became apparent that these names were being used for several different people, none of whom were named Fred or Barney. Further, conversations were sometimes between "Fred" and "Fred" or between "Barney" and "Barney." In fact, conversations would sometimes start out being between "Fred" and "Fred" and end between "Barney" and "Barney." I first assumed the names must have something to do with the cartoon television show called the "Flintstones." While some of the lobstermen may also make this association, I later learned that the actual origin of the names was to be found in the history of Southern Harbor.

"Fred" had been a sternman on one of the Southern Harbor boats during the early 1970's. Being of unusual temperament and personality, he became the subject of numerous stories and tall tales (see also Brown 1985). After he left the area, "Fred" was transformed from the hero of various escapades to a general form of address used in radio transmissions. As one lobsterman stated "For

some reason, we just started calling each other Fred." The name "Barney" also traces its history to an eccentric person from Southern Harbor's past. Besides having very distinctive personal hygiene habits, the man was famous for making-up names for everyone in the community, but used "Barney" as an all-purpose name for anyone he knew on a personal basis. Some of the lobstermen of Southern Harbor have simply adopted this ritualistic greeting and continued it for over twenty years since the man's death.

The important point about the use of "Fred" and "Barney" in radio transmissions is that I have only heard it used by five Southern Harbor lobstermen during radio exchanges. These five lobstermen have certain characteristics in common. They are all successful and come from families that have lived in the community for generations. Three of them live within one block of each other, and two of these are related as uncle and nephew. Three of them belong to the same church and fraternal organization. All five of the men often hunt, fish, and go to stock car races together. They also dominate the radio conversations in Southern Harbor, particularly conversations that share valuable information. Conversations between some pair of these five lobstermen made up 383 (40.5 per cent) of the 945 conversations coded in Southern Harbor in 1988 and 1989. Their dominance of conversations exchanging information on the location of lobsters was even greater as they made up 276 (62.7 per cent) of the 440 calls that included some type of information about the location of lobsters. The dominance of these five lobstermen was still more complete in regard to the conversations that gave positive reports of concentrations of lobsters. Eighty-five (80.2 per cent) of the 106 conversations containing positive reports were made between pairs of these five lobstermen.

Instead of saying that information sharing is much more common in Southern Harbor than Middle Harbor, it is more accurate to say that a handful of lobstermen in Southern harbor engage in a very high degree of information sharing. In fact, it could be said that information about the location of lobsters is shared, and almost only shared, between "Fred" and "Barney." I suggest that the exchange of valuable information and the use of these generalized nicknames both serve the same social function. They reinforce the shared history and complex web of social relationships that have built up over generations among the core members of the Southern Harbor community. These social relationships require the continued cooperation between these lobstermen, and the altruistic sharing of information may be a major means in which these cooperative social relationships are maintained in an otherwise highly competitive industry.

#### **Explanations of Differences in Success**

The importance of promoting, or at least protecting, social relationships is also evident in the verbal etiquette used during interactions among lobstermen when discussing differences in success. It was once generally assumed that differences in fishing success were largely due to differences in the skill of individual fishermen (see Barth 1966; Forman 1967; Davenport 1970; Heath 1976). The impor-



tance of such a "skipper effect" has recently become the subject of considerable debate (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1982, 1983, 1984; Durrenberger and Pálsson 1983, 1985, 1986; Jepson, Thomas & Robbins 1987; Gatewood 1984a; McNabb 1985; Pálsson 1988). Although there is evidence that an objective skipper effect does exist in Maine Lobstering (see Acheson 1977, 1980, 1988), there are still interesting variations in the types of explanations used by the lobstermen themselves to explain differences in success. The use of different explanations in different circumstances is also part of the verbal etiquette needed to balance competition and cooperation in the industry.

Previous studies have explained talk about the importance of a skipper's skill as an attempt to maximize the responsibility of the skipper for the success or failure of his boat. However, Pálsson and Durrenberger also point out that references to "mystical" skill (i.e., hunches, dreams, and intuitions) do not imply as much responsibility as do references to "rational" skill. These authors refer to instances when "the skipper's decisions are said to be the result of 'hunches' over which he has little or no control" in order to "minimize personal responsibility for success or failure" (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1982:240; see also Park 1963; Henricksen 1973). While references to "mystical" abilities reduce the skipper's responsibility, the possibility that he might have some control over these events attributes more responsibility to the skipper than do references to "luck" (in the sense of random chance). The use of luck in avoiding responsibility is clearly stated by Zulaika (1981): "luck ensures that fishermen are less responsible for their lack of success" (Zulaika 1981:77; see also Byron 1988; Löfgren 1989; Orbach 1977). Hence, reasons for fishing success or failure based on rational skill, mystical skill, and luck form three descending levels of responsibility. The following examples illustrate how these different types of explanations are used in different situations depending on whether the social setting is predominantly one of competition or cooperation.

*Example One: Explanations of an "Old Timer's" Poor Fishing*

During recent years, one of the Southern Harbor lobstermen has consistently caught a smaller number of lobsters than most of the other full-time lobstermen. Much of the reason for this is clearly due to his advanced age since it is normal for lobstermen to reduce effort and equipment near the end of their careers (see Acheson 1988). However, I have observed several distinctly different reasons given for his lack of success.

In the presence of the lobsterman, other lobstermen will attempt to lessen the lobsterman's responsibility for his low catches by typically attributing his poor success to "bad luck." This helps to maintain cooperation with the less successful lobsterman whose family has been an integral part of the community for generations. The bad luck is sometimes couched in terms of being a "Jonah," following the old testament character who brought great misfortune on his fishing boat by disobeying the Lord. Such bad luck is also sometimes said to be an inherited trait. However, when the lobsterman is not present, other lobstermen

will competitively attempt to increase their own relative prestige by attributing the lobsterman's lack of success to skills inferior to their own.

*Example Two: Explanations of a "New Kid's" Success*

One of the younger lobstermen in Southern Harbor built a reputation for being particularly successful one spring. There was general agreement among the other lobstermen that this was due to his placement of traps closer to the rocky shore than the other lobstermen dared to fish. When the "new kid" was present, the other lobstermen just tried to ignore his large catches. When he was not present, the older lobstermen attempted to maintain their superior status by telling each other that the "new kid's" success was actually the result of a lack of skill and experience: "He'll learn. Those big catches won't seem like much when he catches a wave wrong and has to swim for shore."

*Example Three: Explanations of a "Dub's" Failure*

A young man lobstering for the first time experienced very poor fishing during his first season in Southern Harbor. He quickly became the object of jokes emphasizing his lack of skill and knowledge. He was particularly famous for asking if "sea urchins made good bait" and believing a more experienced lobsterman when he said they did. The new lobsterman persevered for several seasons and eventually gained some limited success and even some acceptance among the other lobstermen. While they never claimed that he possessed skill, as he began to form social relationships with the other lobstermen they began to tell the new lobsterman that his poor catches were only the result of "bad luck." Among themselves, however, they continued to attribute the new lobsterman's lack of success to his inferior skill.

*Example Four: Explanations of a Southern Harbor Highliner's Success*

One lobsterman in Southern Harbor is considered by many of the lobstermen to be particularly successful in catching large numbers of lobsters. The other lobstermen explain this success in a number of different ways. When talking to the highliner, lobstermen would often attribute his success to a quasi-mystical ability to "smell lobsters" or even "think like a lobster." However, when the highliner was not present, other lobstermen were more likely to attribute his success to his particular kind of trap and the fact that he simply "fished so many traps he can't remember where they all are." Some of the lobstermen who particularly resented the highliner's success would combine explanations based on his effort and equipment with clear derision of the man's actual skill: "he just dumps traps any old place; he has to since he has so many."

*Example Five: Explanations of a Middle Harbor Highliner's Success*

Although my ability to observe explanations of success in the interactions of Middle Harbor lobstermen was limited by the shorter time I spent there, several relevant conversations were observed. The Middle Harbor lobsterman who took me out on his boat for radio observations was known to be a major highliner. His reputation as a successful lobster catcher was even known to a few of the Southern Harbor lobstermen who had relatives or other acquaintances in Middle Harbor. When I mentioned his name to one moderately successful Southern Harbor lobsterman, the lobsterman commented: "Yea, I guess he's been a highliner down there for years. They really know how to catch 'em down there." However, when I mentioned the large size of one of his catches to a Southern Harbor highliner, a different explanation was given: "Oh yea, I've heard about him. But hell, they fish so damn many traps with those trawls, anybody can catch lobsters there." The same differences in explanations were also heard in Middle Harbor. When I told Middle Harbor lobstermen who I was going out with, I would invariably hear a response like: "Well, that's good, he's a good fisherman." One day while waiting on the docks, however, I observed two other lobstermen give a different explanation of the highliner's success. The two lobstermen, who were unaware of my relationship with the highliner, were examining some of the highliner's traps left on the dock. The first lobsterman remarked on how the highliner was always buying the newest kind of trap, and attributed his success to his superior equipment. The second lobsterman then stated "Yea, he has to [keep buying new traps], he can't even remember where half his strings (trawls) are."

### Discussion

Previous explanations of variation in talk about the importance of differences in individual skill in determining catch success have looked at inter-societal differences. Such an approach assumes that each fishing society is uniform in regard to explanations of success. The above examples demonstrate that this is not the case in the Maine lobster industry, and suggest that folk explanations of differences in catches must be studied in their specific social context (see Goffman 1959). In this case, there are no discernable differences between the two harbors. This suggests that explanations of success may depend on the cooperative or competitive nature of the specific social situation as much, or more, than they do on larger social variables. When cooperation is of primary importance in an interaction, the other individual is held responsible for his success while his failures are claimed to be the result of bad luck. When competition is the goal of the interaction, another lobsterman's success becomes a matter of luck while he is held responsible for his failures. The examples given above indicate that explanations of success can often be explained in terms of conflict avoidance in that the presence or absence of the person who is the subject of the conversation appears to be a major determinant of what kind of explanation is given. However, many other factors, particularly the relationships between the in-

dividuals in the interaction and their own standing in the hierarchy of the harbor, are likely to be involved.

### Conclusion

Maine lobstering, like nearly all commercial fisheries, is both an economic and social activity. This paper supplies information relevant to the relation between economic and social aspects of Maine lobstering in two ways. The first concerns the management of information among competitors for a common property resource. While previous studies have attempted to explain differences in information management in terms of economic factors, the current study suggests the importance of also including variations in the social environment. In addition to its economic consequences, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which information sharing can be used to avoid conflict and even promote cooperation between fishermen. The second issue concerns debates over the social function of talk about a skipper effect. While previous studies have demonstrated interesting inter-societal variations in talk about a skipper effect, this paper demonstrates that intra-societal variability based on a particular situation's balance between cooperation and competition also exists. An inclusion of the causes of this intra-societal variation is probably necessary for a full understanding of the social functions of different explanations of success in fishing and other endeavors.

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