Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict, Situational Formality, and Personality as Causes of Interpersonal Equivocation.

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AVOIDANCE-AVOIDANCE CONFLICT, SITUATIONAL FORMALITY, AND
PERSONALITY AS CAUSES OF INTERPERSONAL EQUIVOCATION

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
Doctor of Philosophy
in
The Department of Speech Communication

by
Richard Bello
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1977
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May, 1999
Dedication

To my parents, James Milton Bello and Frances Zumo Bello, who taught me to ask, "What is life without passion?"
Acknowledgements

More than anyone else, I thank my wife Elizabeth and my daughter Frances for their constant love and support for these past seven years. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

The members of my committee have been gracious and helpful beyond compare. I particularly appreciate, probably more than she realizes, Dr. Renee Edwards' astute and willing guidance through difficult intellectual and emotional moments.

I also thank those individuals who aided in the construction of the methodology of this study by serving as expert judges, as well as those who supported my efforts to gather data: Dr. Melvin Berry, Chuck Boutwell, Wendell Douglas, Rick Duet, Bernadette Dugas-Chauvin, Melissa Hopson-Sparks, Suzanne Kimball, Aaron O'Neal, Theo Palomeque, Barbara Prejean, and Dr. James Stewart.
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Abstract

This study explores the causes of a widespread and important communication phenomenon, interpersonal equivocation. Literature is reviewed which shows clearly that a sufficient cause of interpersonal equivocation is situational avoidance-avoidance conflict, but also which suggests the possibility of additional situational (formality of social setting) and trait (self-monitoring) precursors of equivocation. Using a questionnaire technique, participants were asked to imagine themselves in three different interpersonal situations, which were manipulated to vary the level of situational formality. In addition, in each situation, they were asked to respond to a question from their hypothetical conversational partner. These questions were designed to manipulate the other key situational variable, presence or absence of avoidance-avoidance conflict. Participants' responses, consisting of how likely they were to use each of several possible answers previously scaled for degree of equivocation, resulted in equivocation scores for each situation and an overall score. Participants also completed the Revised Self-Monitoring Scale. As expected, results supported a strong role for avoidance-avoidance conflict as an influence upon equivocation, and also suggested that formality level and avoidance-avoidance conflict interact to influence the degree of equivocation. However, none of
the hypothesized interactions between self-monitoring and
the other independent variables were significant, probably
due to the intrusive nature of avoidance-avoidance conflict
as an element of social situations. A surprising discovery
was that higher self-monitoring results in less
equivocation, a finding that is explained by the likelihood
that higher self-monitors are more aware of the importance
of Grice’s Cooperative Principle to the smooth functioning
of human interactions. In addition, several post hoc
findings regarding gender are discussed, especially in
terms of future research possibilities. This research has
demonstrated that, while avoidance-avoidance conflict is
certainly a sufficient cause, there are other situational
and dispositional factors that contribute to our
understanding of interpersonal equivocation.
Chapter 1: Literature Review and Rationale

Equivocation is the use of vague, ambiguous, or nonstraightforward communication, and is a routine and pervasive component of everyday life (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990a; Turner, Edgely, & Olmstead, 1975). As such, to improve our understanding of its causes is also to shed light on the situations in which it is most likely to occur and the circumstances in which it might be most appropriate (as well as, of course, least appropriate). One of the prime contentions of the present study is that the most respected explanation of equivocation (e.g., Bavelas et al., 1990a), while establishing the efficacy of a particular precursor of equivocation, is incomplete. This study, therefore, attempts to shed additional light on the causes of this ubiquitous interpersonal phenomenon.

Scholarly approaches to the concept of equivocation have varied greatly. Researchers from fields other than speech communication have tended to treat the idea negatively. Because equivocation conveys, at least in a general sense, meanings that suggest uncertainty and lack of clarity, it has been approached largely in a fashion that reflects the disparaging connotations of such terms. Perhaps underlying this general thrust in the literature is the way that the concept traditionally has been viewed in philosophical circles. Philosophers have treated
equivocation essentially as a fallacy, or at the very least as a kind of problematically fuzzy, nonlogical thinking and communication (see, e.g., Horwich, 1995; Hunt, 1995). This approach likely has its roots in the western philosophical tradition, which (starting at least with Plato and Aristotle) has placed a premium on clear, categorical thought and expression.

Among those whose focus is political studies, equivocation is often treated as a type of weak public issue support (Blake & Del Pinal, 1981) or as fence-sitting typical of professional politicians. With regard to the latter, not only is such behavior often viewed as part of the makeup of politicians, but also is imbued with less-than-honorable motives and intentions (Ekman, 1985; Spero, 1980). In the study of literature, scholars sometimes analyze written texts for the presence of equivocation. In some cases, they emphasize its use in advancing a theme, yet in other cases treat it more negatively as a kind of falsehood possessing a veneer of truth (D'Amelio, 1991; Fallon, 1992; Rowe, 1988).

Cognitive psychologists, especially those who study event related potentials in the brain (ERPs), continue to treat equivocation as uncertainty about whether an event has been perceived accurately. They see this kind of equivocation as tied both to task difficulty and to varying mental abilities of individuals (Friedman, 1984; Johnson,
1984; Palmer, Nasman, & Wilson, 1994; Ruchkin, Munson, & Sutton, 1982). For example, Houlihan (1994) found that more intelligent individuals cognitively equivocated less while performing a memory scanning task. While not tied directly to the concept of communicative equivocation, such work does suggest the possibility that cognitive ability could be correlated to the perception of equivocation, since more efficient message encoders might be viewed as less equivocal than those who take longer to formulate responses and who vacillate more.

Within the fields of psychiatry and abnormal psychology, starting with the work of the Palo Alto Group in the late 1950s (e.g., Haley, 1959), the closely allied concept of disqualification has been studied as a correlate of dysfunctional family communication. In some cases, it has been closely tied to such pathologies as schizophrenia. Such research has continued into the 1990s (Caruso, 1974; Ford, King, & Hollender, 1988; Holte & Wichstrom, 1990; Jackson & Watzlawick, 1963; Manrique-Solana, 1988; Sluzki, Beavin, Tarnopolsky, & Veron, 1967; Watzlawick, 1963; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Weblin, 1962; Wichstrom & Holte, 1991; Wichstrom, Holte, & Wynne, 1993; Zanor, 1975). Although originally viewed in dysfunctional (and in some cases pathological) terms, the earliest understanding of disqualification by Haley later served as the basis for the most commonly employed definition of
interpersonal equivocation, itself put forward by the Bavelas group (e.g., Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990a). Haley (1959) suggested that schizophrenics often attempt to deny the reality of one or more of the four basic elements that make up any communicative attempt: sender, receiver, content, and context. Hence, such messages were said to "disqualify" themselves. Bavelas and her colleagues have persuasively argued that, even in normal communication, attempts to equivocate can be viewed as attempts to avoid or downplay at least one of these elements (see especially Bavelas et al., 1990a; Bavelas & Smith, 1982). It is this approach to interpersonal equivocation that forms the crux of the present study, and is a part of the more explicitly communicative study of equivocation which will be reviewed next.

Communication Scholars and Equivocation

Within the field of communication (and closely allied fields), scholars have advanced both negative and positive views of equivocation.

Negative Views

Traditionally, equivocation has been presented largely as a phenomenon to be avoided. This emphasis can be credited specifically to a focus upon clarity as an essential gauge of the effectiveness of communication, a focus first given momentum in the formal work of Aristotle (Kennedy, 1991). One of the results of such an esteem for
clarity is that equivocation has been conceived as undesirable error that decreases the very clarity and accuracy that has been so well regarded (see, e.g., Gibson & Mendleson, 1984; Hsia, 1977; Huseman, 1977).

Similarly, argumentation theorists, in keeping with the rhetorical tradition generated so long ago, have most often claimed that equivocation is a specific type of linguistic fallacy in which a given word is used in more than one sense (Capaldi, 1971; McBath, 1963; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). In discussing equivocation from this perspective, Capaldi (1971) reflected the typical view when he sarcastically suggested that "it is sometimes advantageous not to specify the exact sense in which you wish a term to be taken" and that "politics in general, and diplomacy in particular, require the rigid use of equivocation" (p. 49). Along these lines, as recently as 1994, O’Neill applied a critical thinking perspective to the teaching of speech communication (including communication theory and similar courses). He concluded that one of the most valued skills that teachers can help to generate in students is the ability to recognize and to rid their language of equivocation and ambiguity.

Even more recently, still other theorists (Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton & Mineo, 1998) have suggested that equivocation, especially if practiced routinely, can inhibit our chances of determining communally shared
meanings and may lead to diminished source credibility under certain prescribed circumstances. Specifically, Hamilton and Mineo (1998) argue that language communities run the risk of having word meanings increasingly deteriorate into vagueness if they are not vigilant in working at maintaining clarity in language use. These theorists are particularly concerned about what they see as a postmodern tendency toward approaching language meanings as arbitrary. Hamilton (1998), in a meta-analysis of four previous language intensity studies, found that the effect of specificity of language on source credibility was mediated by other message and context factors, especially the degree to which the message was discrepant with receiver attitudes and the quality of arguments made. In other words, depending on circumstances, less precise language can result in negative or positive evaluations of message sources. For example, when a source uses equivocal language, that source's "competence, trustworthiness, and liking" will be less negatively evaluated when the message is discrepant with listener attitudes, does not provide solid justification for claims made, and tends to evaluate receivers based upon how much they agree with the source (Hamilton, 1998, p. 138). Hamilton further suggests that such findings "help to explain the popularity of equivocation as a communicative strategy" (p. 138). Indeed, it is the theoretical strain that emphasizes such
positive possibilities for equivocation that is the focus of the next section.

Positive Views

Other communication theorists have taken a different tack toward equivocation, one which revolves mostly around the notion that it represents a routine, skillful reaction to typical communicative difficulties. Such an approach does in fact seem warranted, especially in light of what some key theorists have suggested about the nature of communicative competence. For example, some have argued that virtually all communicative competence includes a baseline level of "fundamental competence," viewed as "an individual's ability to adapt effectively to the surrounding environment" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 35; see also Connolly & Bruner, 1974). Taken a bit further, this notion has been applied in a way that suggests that competent communicators have both a knowledge base of verbal (and nonverbal) behaviors from which to choose, as well as the performative ability to select the most appropriate behaviors given the nature of the communicative context (Allen & Brown, 1976; Shimanoff, 1980). Seen in these terms, the literature to be reviewed shortly presents equivocation, at least in some cases, as just such a competent adaptation, that is, an "ability to demonstrate appropriate communication in a given context" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 66). Along these same lines, although
focusing mostly upon political rhetoric, Hariman (1992) has invoked the classical concept of "decorum" as a tool for analyzing the propriety and appropriateness of communicative attempts. He suggests that communication effectiveness hinges largely upon "carefully adapting one's presentation of self to the roles established" by the nature of the situation (p. 155).

Normalcy of equivocation. With much less tradition behind it than the negative approach, this positive focus began with the work of Blaine Goss and Lee Williams. Their research challenged the idea that being clear is necessarily good (Goss, 1972; Goss & Williams, 1973; Williams, 1980; Williams & Goss, 1975). It showed, among other things, that especially when people are communicating controversial messages, equivocation can lead to higher source credibility ratings and more agreement from listeners. In a study typical of their methods, Goss and Williams (1973) created different written versions of the same basic message on a controversial issue in order to manipulate independent variables such as degree of equivocation. Participants responded to these different versions, rating the source of equivocated messages (compared to clear, disagreeable messages) as higher in character (though not competence). These authors concluded that a speaker who does not equivocate more disagreeable messages risks losing credibility.
Focusing more specifically on the interpersonal setting, and contemporaneous with the work of Goss and Williams, the research of Turner, Edgely, and Olmstead (1975) documented the degree to which various forms of prevarication are used on a daily basis. Through an analysis of 130 conversations, they concluded that such language forms are not only common, but necessary.

The work of Reinsch (1979) was fundamental in helping to establish the validity of this line of research on interpersonal equivocation. Research previous to Reinsch's had established the impact of what the researchers were calling equivocation (Goss & Williams, 1973; Williams & Goss, 1975), but had not yet established that receivers in fact perceive messages in terms of equivocality (among other things such as intensity and opinionatedness). Reinsch, therefore, had participants respond to a large set of brief messages (using pairs of bi-polar adjectives) and factor analyzed the results, showing that people do indeed routinely perceive messages as more or less equivocal.

With the normalcy of equivocation well established, some researchers began to explore the factors contributing to the occurrence of equivocation. Brown and Levinson (1978) were influential here by suggesting that, as a face-saving measure, individuals routinely adopt a politeness strategy which often involves sending less direct, more equivocal hedges. Building upon this notion, others have
catalogued the ways in which people use tactful messages, sidestepping explicit disagreement in order to save face, whether of self or other (Bull, 1998; Bull, Elliot, Palmer, & Walker, 1996; Capella & Palmer, 1992). For example, Motley (1992) used student diaries in order to uncover a variety of situations in which interpersonal tact is required, suggesting that the mindfulness of communicators in such situations makes them particularly amenable to constructive advice from communication researchers and experts. Still other research, which again assumes the normalcy of equivocation, has suggested some of the factors that influence how people interpret equivocal messages, including gender roles and personality (Edwards, 1998; Edwards, Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Hollems, 1998).

Eisenberg (1984) extended the questioning of the "clarity is always right" maxim by suggesting some of the ways individuals in organizational settings might use ambiguity in a strategic, effective manner. Similarly, other research has demonstrated how equivocation can be an aid to success in courtroom trials (Parkinson, 1981). More recently, Eisenberg (1998) has expanded his view of ambiguity to include the ways it can enhance self development. In this essay, in essence, he suggests that seeking out ambiguity in language opens up psychological and behavioral possibilities that might not have been previously considered.
The Bavelas group. Building largely upon the early Goss and Williams studies, the most sophisticated and empirically grounded program of research on equivocation is that of Janet Bavelas and colleagues (Bavelas, 1983, 1985, 1998; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990a, 1990b; Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bavelas & Smith, 1982). Using the Palo Alto Group's disqualification concept (see above) as a definitional starting point, they presented and defended a strictly situational theory of the causes of equivocation, concluding that avoidance-avoidance conflict (AAC) "is the necessary and sufficient condition for eliciting equivocation" (Bavelas et al., 1990a, p. 262). They defined AAC as involving any situation in which a communicator is faced with two seemingly direct but unattractive communicative choices (as in, typically, having to choose between outright deceit and a hurtful or embarrassing truth). In such situations, they argued (Bavelas et al., 1990a), communicators will choose instead (using the terms of Lewin's conflict theory) to leave the field---"saying nothing while saying something"--which avoids the negative consequences of the direct replies. Less direct communication is equivocal communication, and it is characterized by what it avoids saying as much as by what it does say. (p. 57)

They also asserted that other explanations for equivocation were unsatisfactory, that only the "characteristics [i.e., AAC] of the communicative situation
in which equivocation occurs" had any influence (Bavelas et al., 1990a, p. 62). Their research did clearly demonstrate that when people are faced with AAC, they routinely choose equivocal responses. This basic finding has remained consistent whether the measurement of equivocation is based on forced-choice (Bavelas, 1983), written (Bavelas & Chovil, 1986), spoken (Bavelas et al., 1990b), or face-to-face responses (Bavelas et al., 1988; Bavelas et al., 1990b). Indeed, the Bavelas group built its research program methodically, demonstrating first that people consistently choose equivocal responses in reaction to AAC, and then extending the finding to include spontaneous responses across a variety of channels.

For example, in one experiment Bavelas and colleagues placed some individuals in an AAC bind by having them respond to a "classmate" who asked about the quality of a very poor presentation that he/she had given. Compared to others in a non-AAC version of this situation (where the presentation was of high quality), these individuals typically responded with highly equivocal spoken messages, such as "Ah . . . well, it-ah didn’t go too badly, but-um, there could be some improvements here and there" and "You seemed to `ve, you know, covered--used a lot of the references I--I lent you anyway" (Bavelas et al., 1990a, p. 133).
However, while the Bavelas group certainly did show conclusively that AAC will lead to equivocation (i.e., it is a sufficient cause), it empirically ruled out only a couple of factors as other possible causes, lending little support to the claim that AAC is a necessary cause (see esp. Bavelas, 1983 and Bavelas et al., 1990a). In addition, most recent studies examining causes have refined or extended Bavelas’ situational AAC theory, rather than pursued other contributing factors such as distinct situational characteristics and personality traits. In other words, it appears that the door is open for the possibility of a social cognitive explanation of equivocation in place of a strictly situational one. A social cognitive explanation is one that more fully takes into account both situational and personal variables. How, for example, do personal characteristics (such as personality traits) mediate or influence the perception of situational factors, so that the situational factors become something more than mindless stimuli, and so that additional variance in the dependent variable can be accounted for?

One of the reasons why so little research has pursued the question of a broader social cognitive theory of equivocation has to do with the issue of the conceptual relationship of equivocation to deception. The Bavelas group (esp. Bavelas et al., 1990a, 1990b) has argued that
equivocation is best approached as distinct from deception, suggesting that the dimensions "true-false" and "clear-unclear" can be conceptually separated. In this view, an equivocal message can vary greatly in its degree of truth or falsity. Part of their concern has been that concepts like "lying" and "deception" are unavoidably loaded and virtually impossible to operationalize, leading to too much research focus on motives, cognitions, and intentions rather than on messages themselves. And yet, Buller and Burgoon (1994), in work that summarizes both strategic and nonstrategic approaches to deception, specifically suggest that equivocation is a "popular deception strategy" (p. 200). They then go on to catalogue a number of specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that previous research has found to be associated with the strategic use of "uncertainty and vagueness" (pp. 204-207), thereby implying that the operationalization of the deception construct is more plausible than the Bavelas group might think.

Ironically, it is the Bavelas group’s singular focus upon AAC as the cause of equivocation that has arguably given rise to this current body of research that treats equivocation as a subset of deception, although it does distinguish equivocation from outright falsification or lying. This research focuses upon the verbal and nonverbal correlates of deception (based on Interpersonal Deception Theory) and specifically cites Bavelas’ work on AAC (which
sees equivocation essentially as a skilled method of wriggling out of a predicament) as a rationale for treating equivocation as a form of mildly deceptive strategic information management which ought to be accompanied by performance decrements at the nonstrategic level (e.g., disfluencies) (Buller, Burgoon, White, & Ebisu, 1994; Buller, Burgoon, Buslig, & Roiger, 1994; Buller, Burgoon, Buslig, & Roiger, 1996; Burgoon, Buller, & Guerrero, 1995; Burgoon, Buller, & Guerrero, 1996). Some additional findings support this notion (e.g., Bello, 1998; Tanaka & Bell, 1996). Along these lines, O’Hair and Cody (1994) convincingly argue that Bavelas et al.’s (1990a) clean distinction between equivocation and deception is too simplistic and, indeed, that the Bavelas group’s definition of equivocation amounts to viewing it as a kind of deception.

This state of affairs is unfortunate. Although AAC-based equivocation can certainly be viewed reasonably as a form of deceptive information management, this study hopes to show that equivocation can also be about the management of interaction itself. That is, it can be viewed as one of the many subtle language variables that people rather effortlessly adjust to keep language from becoming obtrusive, and thereby interfering with the smooth, routine flow of human interaction. For example, this approach to at least some equivocation might help us to understand why
a communicator involved in an everyday, informal conversation might say something like "Had dinner with a couple of friends the other night," although the person knows precisely what night, exactly which friends, and whether the steak was rare or medium rare.

Through the work spearheaded by Buller and Burgoon, which assumes the fundamental truth of Bavelas' theory that all equivocation is caused by AAC, equivocation has become tied increasingly to deception. This development has led to a research emphasis on equivocation correlates rather than causes, and hence little work has been done that might challenge (or at least modify) the strict situational AAC explanation. The present study proposes the possibility of such a modification, which is explored in the next section.

Logic of Situational and Trait Explanations of Equivocation

Is a strictly situational explanation of equivocation the most viable, or might traits be implicated within a broader social cognitive framework for understanding equivocation? Certainly it is true that the work of the Bavelas group, as well as the few attempts by others to test the Bavelas hypothesis, demonstrate unequivocally that AAC is a routine and powerful predictor (see esp. Bavelas, 1990a; Bull, 1998; Chovil, 1994; Tanaka & Bell, 1996). Bull (1998) has recently shown, for example, through a textual analysis of several political interviews, that AAC pressures operating
at the level of the interview as a whole led interviewees to give largely equivocal responses of an implicative nature. A study by Tanaka and Bell (1996) also strongly affirmed the basics of the Bavelas theory, applying it cross-culturally to both Japanese and American students by having them respond in writing to hypothetical interpersonal scenarios that either provoked AAC or did not.

However, it is important to realize that the original Bavelas studies ruled out only global unpleasantness and approach-approach conflict as other conceivable causes of equivocation (Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas et al., 1990a). Only these specific precursors were systematically ruled out because Bavelas and colleagues were concerned about the possibility that either the simple conflict dimension or the unpleasant dimension of AAC was actually responsible for their initial findings.

Since then, the studies that have confirmed Bavelas' findings on AAC have generally not searched for other causes, not even other situational causes, let alone trait causes. Some have reformulated AAC in slightly different terms, such as tact situations (Motley, 1992), or posited a more fundamental concept (face) that helps to explain why AAC is so influential. In the latter case, Bull, Elliot, Palmer, and Walker (1996) formulated a typology of the various ways in which political interview questions can
threaten politicians' "face," including that of self, of their party, and of important others. They also suggested the possibility that it is concern for protecting face that underlies the difficult, threatening nature of all AAC situations, at the same time that they confirmed that it is still AAC that directly leads to equivocation. Another study has suggested that equivocation is not always the preferred reaction to AAC, although it suggested no additional precursors to equivocation (Robinson, Shepherd, & Heywood, 1998). Depending upon the social role being acted out, for example, participants in this study sometimes preferred outright lying to equivocation. One research exception to the exclusive focus upon AAC was the study by Tanaka and Bell (1996) previously mentioned. Here, national culture (Japan versus United States) and level of status of the other interactant were proposed, but not supported, as antecedents to equivocation. Although previous research dealing with AAC has advanced little in the way of other precursors to equivocation, some other research, to be examined next, at least indirectly suggests the viability of trait-oriented explanations.

The Potential of Traits

First, with regard to non-personality characteristics, some research suggests that level of cognitive ability (essentially information processing skill) is implicated as a factor in the degree of mental equivocation over whether
a perceived event has actually occurred (Houlihan, 1994; Thorndyke & Bower, 1974). Although not directly related to interpersonal equivocation, such a finding at least implies that communicators who are more efficient processors of AAC binds might give responses that are perceived by others as less equivocal, at least in the sense that the latency of these responses would be shorter than for those who are less efficient. Interestingly, though not a focus of their research, this implication was borne out by Bavelas et al. (1990a) who found longer response latencies on average for messages judged to be most equivocal. However, there is no direct evidence that response latency itself actually causes the perception of greater equivocality.

At least one study treated equivocation as one among several types of deception that patients employ in interactions with doctors. Burgoon, Callister, and Hunsaker (1994), through analysis of a survey of the deceptive practices used in medical interviews by 754 adults drawn from a jury pool, showed that concealment and equivocation were the most preferred deceptive strategies among middle-aged, educated women, but not among some other demographic groups. Such a finding suggests that broad demographic factors could be implicated as causes of equivocation.

Second, there is the possibility that personality has an influence upon equivocation. For example, Carver and
Scheier (1981) found that study participants who were higher in private self-consciousness equivocated more over choice alternatives. Of course, the equivocation referred to here was not indirect interpersonal communication, but rather length of response time in making a decision; that is, the study dealt with psychological rather than explicitly communicative equivocation. In addition, Suzuki (1979) discovered that individuals characterized as "levelers" (as a mode of cognitive schematizing) were more likely to equivocate and to transmit less information than were those characterized as "sharpeners." While this study did not apparently treat leveling-sharpening as a full-fledged personality trait, it did suggest that there might be patterned behavioral tendencies within the population at large with respect to behaviors like equivocation.

Ambiguity tolerance is a personality trait that has been implicated as a precursor of equivocation. Bello (1995) had participants rank-order, for likelihood of use, possible reactions to several interpersonal scenarios which varied in level of situational formality. The participants' responses were then compared to the estimates by a panel of judges of the degree of equivocation of each possible reaction, producing an equivocation score for each participant. This method was similar to that used in early research by Bavelas (1983) in which the emphasis was on establishing (or eliminating) AAC as a likely antecedent of
equivocation, rather than on the subtleties of spontaneously produced messages. Participants also completed a modified version of the MAT-50, developed by Norton (1975) as a measure of the degree to which people prefer psychological closure and clarity. The key finding was that those low in tolerance for ambiguity equivocated more in informal social situations than in formal ones, probably in order to maintain a psychological goodness-of-fit between message and social context, in keeping with communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). In finding an interactive influence of ambiguity tolerance and formality level, this study extended the trend toward social cognitive explanations (see, e.g., Bradac, Hopper, & Weimann, 1989) in an attempt to understand more fully the antecedents of equivocation. A further extension of this trend, one that is of particular concern in the present study, is likely to be found in the ways that self-monitoring (SM) might be implicated in the understanding of equivocation.

Self-Monitoring and Equivocation

SM appears to be a likely antecedent of interpersonal equivocation in several ways. First, however, a definition and discussion of the concept is necessary. Snyder (1974, 1979, 1983, 1986) originally proposed the notion that people systematically vary in the degree to which they monitor their own behaviors (including message behaviors)
and consciously adapt them to fit the constraints of whatever situation they find themselves to be in. Those who more consistently and strongly behave in such a fashion have been identified as high self-monitors, while those who tend to avoid such behavior are low self-monitors. High SMs are more motivated by externals, characteristics of the social situation, whereas low SMs are more internally motivated. In essence, low SMs can be thought of as asking "Who am I and how can I be that person, whatever the situation?" On the other hand, high SMs can be thought of as asking "What does the situation expect of me and how can I fulfill that expectation?" (see esp. Snyder, 1979; Bell, 1987). Although there have been some concerns about how well the original Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974) actually reflects the underlying theory, quite a number of studies have confirmed the basics of the theory and its relevance to interpersonal communication. For example, Lindsey and Greene (1987) have shown that high and low SMs are in fact different in terms of the kinds of social knowledge that they possess, other-oriented and self-oriented respectively.

Early research on SM suggested that the Self-Monitoring Scale was collapsible into a set of three factors thought to represent different dimensions of the SM concept: acting (ability to modify self presentations), other-directedness (basing one’s own communication behavior...
on knowledge about the other), and extroversion (tendency toward social activity) (Briggs, Cheek, & Buss, 1980). Since that time, others have found fault with the degree of fit between the original 25-item Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974) and Snyder's original theoretical conception of the trait (see esp. Allen, 1996; Dillard & Hunter, 1989; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). As a consequence, Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) revision of the scale into one that includes two underlying dimensions (leaving out the extroversion factor) now represents the most commonly employed and most defensible conceptualization of the trait.

In general terms, the connection between attitude and behavior is stronger for low SMs than for high SMs (Ajzen, Timko, & White, 1982; Snyder & Tanke, 1976). Also, reciprocation is more important to high SMs, who are more likely to reciprocate the self-disclosive behaviors of conversational partners, to be guided by their conversational partners' behaviors, and to change their messages to make them more consistent with the attitudes of their listeners (McCann & Hancock, 1983; Shaffer, Smith, & Tomarelli, 1982). High SMs also pursue social knowledge more readily than do low SMs. They are, therefore, more likely to recall information about others and to make use of information they gather during conversations (Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Douglas, 1983).
SM and communication success. One of the ways in which SM appears to be related to interpersonal equivocation is that, like equivocation, it can be thought of as representing a competent, skilled communicative reaction to the constraints of social situations. At least a tentative link between SM and success at communication can be found in the relationship of SM to the development of basic communication skills, such as referential communication abilities in children and second language acquisition in adults (Kuslansky, 1992; Limpapath, 1994). Specifically, the poor performance of young children on referential tasks has been attributed to their relative inability to take the perspective of the other during such tasks, that is, their inability to be other-directed (Kuslansky, 1992). In addition, among a sample of adults attempting to acquire another language, those who were higher SMs reported higher degrees of satisfaction with communication (Limpapath, 1994).

Other studies suggest an even stronger link between SM and interpersonal communication competence. For example, in a study of conversations between female college students, SM was positively related to the perception of communication competence by the other interactant (Yingling, 1986). Along these same lines, there is ample evidence that higher SMs are more socially competent. Montgomery, Haemmerlie, and Melchers (1987), in a
correlational study involving SM and scales measuring tendencies such as social avoidance and degree of psychosocial support, found that higher SMs appeared more competent and confident in interactions. Also, Douglas (1983, 1984) has shown that high SMs possess more sophisticated knowledge used for generating possible communication responses in friendly and initial interactions, while Bell and Daly's research (1984) has found that they have more knowledge of how to generate liking. In an intriguing study on conversational dilemmas, Daly, Diesel, and Weber (1994) had participants rate how likely they would be to use each of a variety of responses to such dilemmas. They also had a panel of communication experts do the same, and then compared the two sets of ratings. One of their key findings was that participants who scored higher on the other-oriented dimension of SM tended "to choose the more sophisticated and effective responses, ones that more closely matched those of the panel of communication experts" (p. 153). Although these authors reported no correlation between response sophistication and degree of equivocation, carefully examining the actual response choices suggests that there was such a connection, that the more sophisticated responses were also somewhat more equivocal (and that certainly they were not the least equivocal). In other words, assuming that the sophisticated responses were also
more equivocal, we have here a fairly direct connection between SM and interpersonal equivocation.

Although not quite as direct a connection, a study by Hample and Dallinger (1987) proposed that high SMs would be more likely than low SMs to give person-centered reasons (as construed by constructivist theory) for rejecting the use of particular arguments in compliance-gaining situations. Such reasons included concerns about "the other's face, ... self-image, and ... the relationship in general" (p. 152). Although the findings, based on a questionnaire method, showed no strong effects for SM in general, they did show that those high in the other-directedness dimension of SM were more likely to rely on at least some of the person-centered rationales. This finding suggests that high SMs could be more adept at handling situations where concerns about face (as in AAC binds) are paramount, and could therefore be more skillful and adaptive equivocators.

These studies, then, imply that SM is positively related to communication enhancement. If equivocation is properly seen as error (a traditional view, see above), then high SM should mean less equivocation, since high SM interactants would want to avoid unclear statements. However, if (as expected) interactants do not view equivocation as error, but rather as a necessary and skillful adjustment to situational constraints, then high
SMs might equivocate more under certain circumstances and less under others. Those circumstances will be identified and discussed later in this chapter, and then that rationale summarized and extended in the next chapter, leading to the positing of specific hypotheses and a research question.

**SM and situational focus.** Another way in which SM is likely related to equivocation is that, almost by definition, it represents an enhanced focus on situational constraints (e.g., Larkin, 1987; Bell, 1987), some of which (e.g., AAC) might suggest the need for more equivocation. The focus of high SMs on situational constraints can be found, first of all, in the attention they pay to the nature of conversations themselves. For example, Daly, Vangelisti, and Daughton (1987) formulated and tested a measure of conversational sensitivity, and then did a correlational study in which 230 students in communication classes completed this measure along with measures of several personality traits. Their findings showed, among other things, that SM and conversational sensitivity were directly related, suggesting that high SMs focus more on the characteristics of conversations in recalling social interactions. Their "enhanced sensitivity results in greater adaptability by high self-monitors both to other interactants and to the social demands of the situation" (p. 169).
This focus by high SMs on conversations themselves extends as well to the reciprocity and variability of self-disclosive behaviors. In a study in which participants were paired with confederates for conversations in which the confederates disclosed either highly intimate or low intimacy information, high SMs reciprocated with information of a similar intimacy level significantly more than did low SMs (Smith, Shaffer, & Tomarelli, 1981). In a somewhat similar vein, Tardy and Hosman (1982) hypothesized that, since SM has been positively associated with behavioral variation within and across situations, it ought also to be positively related to the degree of flexibility in self-disclosure. Participants completed both the Self-Monitoring Scale and the Chelune Self-Disclosure Situations Survey (which can measure variability in self-disclosure across a variety of social settings). Indeed, those higher in SM indicated they would vary their self-disclosures more than those lower in SM, suggesting that they were more attuned to aspects of social settings judged to be relevant to self-disclosure. The question, then, can be posed: could the flexibility and variety in self-disclosure (and other communicative behaviors) of high SMs extend as well to equivocation behavior? The findings just discussed suggest that possibility since those who are willing to vary their communication would also seem more likely to use equivocation in those circumstances that appear to call for
it. Admittedly, of course, this possibility is attenuated by the fact that historically, in social science research, there have been relatively low correlations between self-reports and actual communication behavior, particularly in the area of self-disclosive behavior (see, e.g., Duck, 1991).

The focus of high SMs on situational constraints can also be seen in the relationship of SM to conformity. Specifically, Rarick, Soldow, and Geizer (1976) placed participants in hypothetical situations that created more (groups of three to six) or less (dyads) pressure to conform. Whatever the level of conformity pressure, all of the situations suggested that the participant had a private reaction that was the opposite of the reaction exhibited by the other people in the situation. Participants were then faced with several possible message choices, varying in the degree to which they conformed to the feelings of the others. In this sense, these situations represented a kind of AAC (although unacknowledged by these researchers), that is, "do I conform, saving face but being untrue to my feelings, or do I fully reflect my feelings and thus risk losing face?" And yet, participants did not react in a uniform manner. As the authors expected, high SMs chose more conforming responses than low SMs only in the group (high conformity pressure) situations, not in dyads. Similarly, in an earlier study, Snyder and Monson (1975)
found that high SMs were more likely to conform in situations where consensus was made salient than in situations where it was not, whereas low SMs did not vary their degree of conformity across such situations. Although these findings on conformity do not deal with equivocation per se, they do imply that high SMs might be more attuned to aspects of situations that suggest the possibility of face-saving concerns and tactics (as pressures to conform often do), and therefore also more attuned to whether equivocation seems necessary or viable.

High SMs also display their focus on situational constraints in a way that manifests affective consequences. For example, in a study exploring participants' reactions to the process of performing in a job interview, results showed that low SMs found such adaptation to situation personally difficult and a cause of dissonance, whereas high SMs experienced far fewer of such negative reactions (Larkin & Pines, 1992). In addition, in research based on symbolic interactionist tenets, over 200 college students indicated the level of their self-esteem and the nature of their parents' style of discipline. Among these participants, self-esteem was more strongly tied to the type of parental discipline for high SMs than it was for low SMs (Buri & Mueller, 1988).

Finally, even nonverbals (especially physical appearance) demonstrate the strength of the association
between SM and situational focus. Not only do high SMs 
(based on their reactions to a questionnaire dealing with 
body image) focus more attention on their own physical 
appearance, presumably because that appearance is important 
to them as context for communication (Harnish & Sullivan, 
1987), but others are also able to distinguish them from 
low SMs on the basis of their physical appearance, 
specifically wardrobe selections (Larkin & Pines, 1988). 
In a finding that is probably based in part on their 
sensitivity to nonverbals, as well as to other social 
situational cues, high SMs displayed more accuracy in 
detecting deception in others than did low SMs (Brandt, 
Miller, & Hocking, 1980).

The corpus of work discussed in this section 
demonstrates clearly that high SMs are more aware of 
situational cues than are others, and make more use of 
them. It follows, therefore, that they might very well be 
more sensitive to the presence or absence of AAC and its 
face-saving implications, as well as to other situational 
constraints that influence tendencies toward or away from 
equivocation. This rationale will be discussed further in 
the next chapter and used to propose, in that chapter, a 
hypothesis dealing with the connection of SM and AAC in 
influencing equivocation.

**SM and avoiding deception detection.** In addition to 
interpersonal communication competence and situational
focus, still another connection between SM and equivocation is suggested by the enhanced abilities of high SMs to avoid deception detection. This general finding implies that high SMs possess particularly adaptive equivocation skills, especially when faced with AAC binds.

In support of this notion, a study by deTurck and Miller (1990) used both trained and untrained observers to detect deception in others who had been instructed either to lie or to tell the truth in mock interviews. Sixteen of these interviewees had been labeled as high SMs, while the other sixteen were low SMs (based upon their scores on the Self-Monitoring Scale). Based on the rationale that "high self-monitors are more likely to act deceptively in order to curry acceptance" especially in "social contexts [that] call for people to behave in ways that conflict with their personal feelings" (p. 604), the researchers expected that high SMs would be more adept at controlling the behavioral cues that might suggest deception (see, e.g., Elliot, 1979; Riggio & Friedman, 1983). The results strongly supported this expectation, showing that untrained observers who evaluated high SMs were the least able to accurately detect deception. In a similar study some years earlier, Miller, deTurck, and Kalbfleisch (1983) also found that high SMs were better able to avoid deception detection, particularly when the messages had been rehearsed.
Although the behavioral cues used to detect deception in these studies did not include Bavelas' dimensions of equivocality, the studies cannot rule out that observers might have been "fooled" to some degree by enhanced equivocation abilities of high SMs. These findings suggest the possibility that more adaptive equivocation capabilities of high SMs could play a role in making their deceptive statements more difficult to assess, especially in situations where equivocation is AAC-induced and thus arguably involves deceptive attempts to manage information.

Not only does there appear to be a prime candidate (in SM) for a trait precursor to equivocation, but in addition, the discussion thus far has at least implied that there might be situational constraints other than AAC (or its close relatives, such as tact situations and face) that could serve as part of an interactive explanation of equivocation. That is, what additional situational characteristics might high SMs make use of as they adjust their interpersonal equivocation? The next section will explore answers to this question.

Other Situational Antecedents

One candidate for situational antecedent of equivocation was pointed out by Bavelas (1998) herself while discussing the research of Galisinski (1998) on equivocation occurring in recent Polish presidential debates. She suggested that the structure of equivocation

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that Galisinski observed to be common in the debates, a disclaimer followed by an utterance that violated the debate rules (e.g., "I don't mean to interrupt, but . . ."), might well have been motivated by approach-avoidance conflict. This kind of conflict might occur in a situation where a speaker is attracted to the prospect of saying something specific (approach), but is situationally discouraged or prohibited from saying it (avoidance). It is difficult, however, to argue that such a notion uncovers a situational precursor to equivocation that is conceptually distinct from AAC. Approach-avoidance conflict, like the concepts of face and tact situations discussed earlier, is a close cousin of AAC. In fact, as applied to communicative situations, the kind of approach-avoidance that Bavelas referred to in this case can be easily reconstrued as a kind of AAC: not expressing one's self truthfully and running the risk of appearing weak versus expressing self truthfully but violating the rules and so losing credibility.

Another candidate, one that appears to come closer to representing a truly distinct situational precursor of equivocation, has been suggested by the work of Chovil (1994) and others (Rummelhart, 1983; Sharrock & Turner, 1978). In an essay summarizing and evaluating much of the research on the interactional nature of equivocation, Chovil pointed out that in addition to the research of the
Bavelas group (in which Chovil was involved) demonstrating the power of AAC to cause equivocation, there also appeared to be an influence of the degree of situational clarity versus uncertainty in producing equivocation, at least in a handful of studies. For example, Sharrock and Turner (1978) studied phone calls to a city police station in the process of examining the way in which people formulate complaints. Although it is normally best to be clear and direct when phoning in complaints to the police, these researchers discovered that in situations where the nature of the event being complained about did not cleanly fall under the heading of police business (and in that sense, was vague or ambiguous), the complaint calls were likely to be much less direct and more equivocal and rambling. Sharrock and Turner suggested that such calls actually fit the nature of the situation better and helped to legitimize the complaint as one that might be handled in some manner by the police.

Similarly, Rummelhart (1983), in examining the communication during interviews of individuals with mental handicaps, found that these individuals routinely varied the level of clarity of their responses depending upon the nature of the setting, especially how well they understood the context of the interaction. The more uncertain they were about that context, the more equivocal were their responses.
Such work is certainly suggestive of the possibility that a situational characteristic other than AAC is at work in influencing interpersonal equivocation. Especially in the case of the research on complaints, it is difficult to merely reconstrue such findings in terms of AAC, particularly in the sense that callers did not appear to be faced with two distinct, unattractive approaches to formulating a message (as in AAC, where choosing a clear, direct truth is often at odds with choosing a clear, direct falsehood). In a statement that summarizes nicely the way in which these callers seemed to be reflecting the nature of the situation, Chovil (1994) pointed out that "ambiguity in the nature of the troubles resulted in formulations that deviated from the more straightforward style of complaint giving" (p. 121).

However, while such work is suggestive, it is merely and only suggestive. For one thing, it is reasonable to argue that the situation of the mentally handicapped studied by Rummelhart (1983) represents a genuine AAC bind. That is, perhaps these individuals (especially in institutional settings) felt pressures neither to give direct, truthful answers for fear of being inappropriately labeled, nor direct false answers for fear of some kind of reprisal. Secondly, both Rummelhart's and Sharrock and Turner's (1978) studies were conducted on individuals and social settings that do not represent what might be thought
of as more typical, routine kinds of interactions. Finally, though the work was helpful in describing the nature of the messages used in such settings, it was not experimentally concerned with teasing out factors causative of equivocation. Situational clarity, in any case, is a general, vague concept that would have been difficult to operationalize as an independent variable even if the researchers had been so inclined. For these reasons, perhaps another candidate that can be more specifically conceptualized, but which can also be approached as one factor that contributes to the overall level of situational clarity-uncertainty, needs to be explored. That candidate is level of situational formality versus informality.

**Formality as precursor.** The research on situational formality as it might relate to potential research on equivocation falls under four major headings. First, some of the work in sociolinguistics has dealt with how formality is constituted as part of communicative events and sheds light on the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. Particularly, the research of Irvine (1978, 1979) was foundational here. Her primary purpose was to analyze the usefulness of the concept of formality-informality in anthropological studies, especially those dealing with communication ethnography. She argued for the existence of four aspects of formality that appear to cut across a wide variety (culturally) of communication related events, two
of which are more specifically concerned with characteristics of situation (as opposed to code choices themselves) and so are the most relevant to the present study. One of these is that social situations increase in formality as the degree of social distance increases, often in terms of the nature of roles played and of differences in rank. For example, other things being equal, a job interview (featuring the public roles of interviewer and interviewee along with accompanying status differences) can be said to be relatively formal compared to an impromptu lunch shared by friends or acquaintances. The other key aspect, according to Irvine, is that more formal situations provide an increased focus upon a central situational theme and/or activity. Again, the job interview versus shared lunch examples can be seen to differ here as well, and so display an even greater formality difference than perhaps noticed at first glance. Interestingly, one of Irvine's two remaining aspects of formality, an increase in rules that require structure in verbal and nonverbal behaviors, implies that greater formality might mean (at least in some circumstances) a reciprocal decrease in equivocation. This possibility is explored at greater length in the next chapter.

Second, the work of Bradac and colleagues on factors that influence how we evaluate others' levels of linguistic diversity has included formality level as one such factor.
(Bradac, Konsky, & Davies, 1975, 1976). Most relevant to the present study is how these researchers conceptualized and operationalized formality level. Although they did not explicitly follow the lead of Irvine, they did view formality in a way that was consistent with Irvine’s notion, at least partially, arguing that the key aspect of situational formality is an increase in role distance between communicators. Along these lines, therefore, in both studies they operationalized formality by presenting some participants with a hypothetical situation involving an interview for a teaching position in which the interviewer was "the dean of a college of education" (formal), and the other participants with a situation involving spontaneous communication between students in the classroom (informal) (Bradac et al., 1976, p. 73). Besides differing on the element of role distance, note also that these hypothetical situations differed as well on the other key formality aspect of Irvine’s, that of degree of centralized focus within the situation.

A third area of research on situational formality that is potentially related to equivocation (including the present study) is the body of work in which formality has been presented as an overall relational theme (see, e.g., Burgoon, 1991; Burgoon, Newton, Walther, & Baesler, 1989; Burgoon, Pfau, Parrot, Birk, Coker, & Burgoon, 1987; Donohue, Weider-Hatfield, Hamilton, & Diez, 1985; Lamude,
Scudder, & Dickson, 1993). In early research synthesizing the fundamental dimensions of relational communication (those verbal and nonverbal messages that define the overall tenor of a relationship), formality emerged as one such dimension (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Wish & Kaplan, 1977). Burgoon and Hale (1984) referred to this dimension as a "relational theme not explicitly recognized elsewhere . . . [that] reflects the degree of personalism, reserve, and decorum being exhibited" (p. 209). Note the similarity conceptually between "personalism" and Irvine’s (1979) formality aspect of degree of social distance, as well as the similarity between "decorum" and Irvine’s idea of rules that require more structure in verbal and nonverbal behaviors (see above). In another study (Burgoon & Hale, 1987), these authors formulated a valid and reliable measure of the dimensions of relational communication, in which formality emerged as a legitimate factor.

With regard to formality as relational theme, it is fair to say that while it is not best thought of as a strictly situational influence upon social interaction, it can be seen as an important contribution to the overall context in which interaction occurs.

There is a fourth, limited area of research which has examined situational formality level more explicitly as a precursor of equivocation. One study that is only mildly
suggestive of a connection was conducted by Little and Gelles (1972), who used questionnaire data obtained from graduate students to show that more advanced students, who apparently perceived a less formal relationship with their professors than did other students, often avoided specific forms of addressing professors as a way of displaying the ambiguous nature of their relationships. In an admittedly roundabout way, this finding implies that informality and equivocal messages are complementary to one another and, by contrast, that formality and equivocation are often at odds (except, as will be made clearer shortly, in situations with AAC binds). Along similar lines, the applied linguist Channell (1994) reported on extensive naturally occurring data, both spoken and written. In the process, she listed several potential reasons for the use of equivocal language and justified each with samples of data. Certain of these reasons, such as "politeness" (p. 190) and "self-protection" (p. 188), likely fall under the general heading of AAC already claimed by the Bavelas group to be the only cause of equivocation. However, reasons such as situational "informality and atmosphere" (p. 191) do not seem to fit neatly within the rubric of AAC.

Using such tentative findings as a point of departure, other research has more specifically and systematically examined the influence of situational formality level upon equivocation (Bello, 1995). Here, participants were placed
in a variety of hypothetical scenarios, all of which were explicitly designed not to invoke AAC, but which did manipulate formality level. For example, those in the formal condition imagined themselves in situations such as a job interview, a college television interview, and a conversation with a master of ceremonies before a presentation. In the informal condition, participants imagined themselves chatting with a friend at a social gathering, having lunch with an acquaintance in the union, and talking with friends in a restaurant. In both conditions, participants were asked to indicate (using a forced-choice questionnaire) how they would most likely respond to questions (the same across conditions) from their hypothetical interlocutors. The key main effect finding of the study was that participants chose responses that were significantly less equivocal, as was expected, in the formal condition than in the informal condition. This result was anticipated and explained essentially in terms of the application of a goodness-of-fit principle routinely in effect for communicators, that is, that they follow the taken-for-granted norm that adjusts degree of message clarity (or, conversely, equivocation) to match the perceived degree of clarity (or vagueness/ambiguity) within the situation. This norm can be deduced as a combination of Grice's (1975, 1981) quantity and manner maxims, parts of his Cooperative Principle of conversation. In addition,
other findings of the study showed that the degree to which the goodness-of-fit norm was applied depended on personality, specifically ambiguity tolerance. Because we have already seen that formal situations include elements that suggest the importance of precision (e.g., clearly and publicly defined roles, central thematic focus, increased code structuring), it makes sense to argue that "an interpersonal communicator’s language choices can be channeled along more or less precise paths by the formality level of the setting" much like "a formal suit of clothes restricts the wearer’s range of motion and posture along more precise paths" (Bello, 1995, p. 9).

Besides exerting some degree of influence on its own, other findings indicate that formality level could play an interactive role along with AAC in influencing equivocation (Bello, 1998). Reasoning that there is often more at stake in formal (than informal) communicative situations, at least in the sense that increased social distance and role rigidity, as well as focus upon a central conversational theme, make mistakes less easily repairable, Bello examined the possibility of a more fully interactive model for understanding equivocation. The expectation of the study was that, because the consequences of not avoiding an AAC bind would be much more serious in formal than in informal situations, there ought to be an interactive effect between formality and AAC that is quite different from formality
working alone. Specifically, there ought to be the least equivocation in formal settings with no AAC (in line with Bello, 1995), but the most equivocation in formal settings with AAC, and more moderate levels of equivocation in informal settings with and without AAC. For example, a person asked about college GPA in a job interview ought to communicate precisely and unequivocally provided that the GPA is strong (i.e., no AAC). But notice that if GPA is weak (presence of AAC), then equivocation becomes a much more attractive alternative, especially in a formal setting where the consequences of not neutralizing the AAC bind are more serious. Here, formality would have a seemingly opposite effect. And in informal settings, where the neutralization of AAC is less salient, the gap in equivocation from presence to absence of AAC should be smaller. Using a within-subjects design, results obtained were directly in line with these predictions.

One of the themes that emerges from the review of relevant situational formality literature is the strong degree of consistency in views of its basic dimensions. In sum, increased formality implies greater social distance (defined, e.g., by differences in rank and social roles), less personalism, more constraining rules for verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and/or increased focus on a singular situational theme or activity. Here, of course, are implications for the operationalization of formality in the
present study. Another theme that emerges is that situational formality is a salient (and at times powerful) influence upon communication. Although relatively little research has been done explicitly connecting the two, formality level would appear to exert an influence upon degree of interpersonal equivocation, especially as mediated by the presence or absence of AAC and (perhaps) by differing perceptions of high and low SMs concerning its salience. Such themes are used as the basis for specific expectations to be laid out in the following chapter.

Summary

In the current chapter, we have seen that equivocation is a concept that traditionally has been viewed from a largely negative perspective, both inside and outside the speech communication discipline. Other literature has treated equivocation as a routine and necessary part of everyday interaction, including the work of the Bavelas group, which has put forward the most rigorous and respected theory as to the causes of equivocation. However, in an attempt to modify that theory in terms of a broader social cognitive framework, a rationale has been laid out for an explanation of equivocation that includes trait (SM) and additional situational (formality level) components. Next, that rationale is summarized and specific hypotheses and a research question are advanced.
Chapter 2: Rationale Summary and Hypotheses

As was indicated in the previous chapter, there are good reasons to suspect that, although AAC remains the most consistent and powerful cause of interpersonal equivocation, there likely are additional factors that enter into a more sophisticated model for understanding and predicting equivocation. That model and its accompanying hypotheses now follow.

The first and most obvious prediction of this study involves the only fully expected main effect relationship, the influence of AAC upon equivocation. Because the research of the Bavelas group (see previous chapter) has demonstrated the nature of the relationship, it is expected that:

\[ H_1: \text{Participants responding to interpersonal situations that invoke AAC will equivocate more than will those participants responding to non-AAC situations.} \]

In keeping with a social cognitive explanatory emphasis (e.g., Bradac, Hopper, & Weimann, 1989) that would suggest a number of factors, situational and individual, that interact to influence message behavior, it is expected that the bulk of the precursors of equivocation will be constituted by interactive effects. Although at least one previous study (Bello, 1995) found a relationship between
situational formality level and equivocation, another study (Bello, 1998) that also included a manipulation of AAC found no such main effect relationship. It is expected, therefore, that the influence of formality level will be restricted to interactive effects, since any possible main effect will likely be washed out by the strong and predominant influence of AAC. Likewise, because the influence of SM, by its very nature, would appear to depend upon the differing perceptions by high and low SMs of the communicative situation itself, the influence of SM likely will also be limited to interactive effects.

As at least suggested by earlier research (Bello, 1995), formal situations working alone produce less equivocation than informal situations, because communicators likely prefer a goodness-of-fit between the clarity of their message behavior and the clarity of the situation. While this should hold in situations that are not infused with AAC, recall that other research (Bello, 1998) has suggested that when AAC is provoked, formal situations might very well have the opposite effect, producing strong equivocation because the consequences of not avoiding AAC appear more dire in formal settings. On the other hand, the presence or absence of AAC would appear less salient in informal situations. Therefore, a second hypothesis is proposed:
H₂: Formality level and AAC will interact such that formal situations without AAC will produce the lowest degree of equivocation, while formal situations with AAC will produce the highest degree of equivocation, with more moderate equivocation occurring in informal situations.

What is likely to happen when SM is thrown into this mix? Recall that since high SMs have a communicatively skilled situational focus (e.g., Daly, Diesel, & Weber, 1994; Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987), as well as an enhanced deception detection ability (e.g., deTurck & Miller, 1990) that at least implies more adaptive equivocation skills, they would appear more likely than low SMs to focus upon and to adapt to situational constraints that call for more or less equivocation. These would include the face-saving implications of AAC as well as clarity-vagueness differences implied from formal to informal situations. The effect of AAC in particular should be exacerbated for high SMs, who will be more focused on face-saving concerns for self and other, while low SMs will more likely desire to present self "as is." This line of reasoning suggests another hypothesis:
H₃: SM and AAC will interact such that high SMs will equivocate substantially more in AAC situations than in non-AAC situations, whereas low SMs will equivocate more similarly across AAC conditions. In other words, the disparity in equivocation between AAC and non-AAC situations will be greater for high SMs than for low SMs.

Because the presence or absence of AAC is probably more salient to communicators than is formality level (considering the sheer intrusiveness of AAC into conscious awareness), high SMs will likely react more strongly to AAC as a situational characteristic than they will to level of formality. We might or might not, therefore, see a similar kind of equivocation difference for high SMs from formal to informal situations. Any such difference that did occur would probably be in the non-AAC condition only, because any formal to informal difference for high SMs would likely be washed out by the predominant impact of AAC. In other words, someone faced with AAC is likely to be much less concerned with how formal the situation is--the AAC will exert a much stronger influence upon how that person
communicates (including degree of equivocation). A research question is therefore proposed:

RQ: How, if at all, will SM and formality level interact to influence degree of interpersonal equivocation?

In essence, we have thus far seen that the influence on equivocation of situational factors like formality and AAC might be exacerbated by increased SM. This notion is based on the rationale that high SMs pay more attention to contextual cues that are salient to their communication, especially (but not only) when face-saving concerns are involved. These greater adaptive tendencies possessed by high SMs should, therefore, enhance not only the effects on equivocation of AAC and formality level separately, but should also enhance the interactive effect described earlier in the second hypothesis. That is, if indeed there exists the greatest gulf in equivocation between formal situations with AAC and formal situations without AAC (see rationale above), then high SMs ought to be more attuned to the cues that cause such a difference and more able to make the necessary adaptations. Therefore, a final hypothesis involving a three-way interaction is put forward:

H₄: SM will interact with both formality level and AAC such that the difference in equivocation
between formal AAC situations and formal non-AAC situations will be greater for high SMs than for low SMs.

The following chapter will explain the methods of design, data collection, and statistical analyses used for testing these hypotheses and answering the research question. In addition, it will report the results of a pilot study that partially explores these methods.
Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

Participants (N = 247) were recruited from speech communication classes at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. They ranged in age from 18 to 47, with a mean age of 20.55 (SD = 4.42). Every student classification was represented in the sample, although freshmen predominated at 53.4%. More females (n = 148) than males (n = 98) participated, with one person failing to specify gender.

Independent Variables

Formality Level

Formality level was manipulated using three basic interpersonal scenarios to which participants gave forced-choice responses. (See Appendix.) Using the essential characteristics of situational formality (described in the first chapter, esp. Irvine, 1979) as a guide, the main body of the scenarios were modified in order to render formal and informal social settings for each one. For example, the informal scenario involving a party had as its formal counterpart a version that involved attending an elegant dinner. Each scenario, whether formal or informal version, ended with the same question from a hypothetical conversational partner. Each of these three questions (one for each basic scenario) was constructed as a realistic component of the scenario (both formal and informal versions) with which it was paired. For example, both the
Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict

In order to manipulate AAC (presence or absence), the assumed reality that formed the basis for answering a given question occurred in two forms, one that provoked AAC and one that did not. For example, in the AAC version the assumed reality for the job enjoyment question was "Assume that you have had problems with that job and were fired last week." In the non-AAC version, this assumption was transformed to "Assume that your job has been going well and that you've recently received an 'Employee-of-the-Month' certificate." (See Appendix for AAC and non-AAC assumptions for all questions.) This method for manipulating AAC is consistent with the approach of the Bavelas group.

In sum, then, each participant responded to a series of three scenarios with accompanying questions. Since the study used a between-subjects design, for any given participant all of the scenarios with questions invoked either formal or informal social situations and either AAC or no AAC.

Manipulation Checks

To help assure the validity of these manipulations, a panel of five judges trained in the concepts of situational
formality and AAC were asked to indicate the level of formality of each scenario version and whether or not AAC was induced by each question. Recently, a panel of judges reliably made such distinctions regarding similar scenarios and questions (working revision of Bello, 1995). For the present study, average intercoder reliability was .86 (Scott's pi) regarding the presence or absence of AAC in the questions used, with only one aberrant judge and for only one question. Average reliability regarding level of formality of scenarios used was 1.00 (Scott's pi). These levels of agreement suggest strong content validity for the AAC and formality level manipulations in this study.

Also, a separate sample of participants (n = 43) rated the degree of formality of each scenario and the degree to which each scenario question induced AAC. For this purpose, distinct Likert-type scales were used ranging from 1 (extremely informal, no AAC) to 7 (extremely formal, extreme AAC). Before administration of these scales, participants were given a brief tutorial on the concepts of situational formality and AAC. Results, using t-tests, revealed significant differences (as expected) between formal and informal versions of all scenarios and between AAC and non-AAC questions. Participants responding to the formal version of the first scenario (job interview) rated it as significantly more formal (M = 5.41, SD = 1.10) than those responding to the informal version (lunch with a
friend) \( (M = 2.29, SD = .85), t = -10.42, df = 41, p < .0001, \) one-tailed. Also, the mean for the elegant dinner version (formal) of the second scenario \( (4.14, SD = 1.55) \) was higher than for the party version \( (2.52, SD = 1.54), t = -3.42, df = 41, p = .0005, \) one-tailed. In addition, the college interview scenario was perceived as more formal \( (M = 4.09, SD = 1.46) \) than its informal counterpart \( (M = 2.86, SD = 1.48), (in restaurant with friend), t = -2.75, df = 41, p = .0045, \) one-tailed. Finally, an overall measure of perceived formality (summing across scenarios) was also significant \( (M = 13.64, SD = 2.97 \text{ versus } M = 7.67, SD = 2.50), t = -7.12, df = 41, p < .0001, \) one-tailed.

The results for the perception of AAC were as encouraging. With regard to the GPA question, the scale mean for the AAC version \( (M = 4.23, SD = 1.60) \) was higher than for the non-AAC version \( (M = 3.00, SD = 1.87), t = -2.31, df = 41, p = .013, \) one-tailed. Similar results were obtained for the question about enjoyment of one’s off-campus job, with means of 4.32 \( (SD = 1.78) \) and 2.29 \( (SD = 1.35), t = -4.20, df = 41, p < .0001, \) one-tailed. Also, participants saw differences in the AAC \( (M = 4.59, SD = 1.65) \) and non-AAC \( (M = 2.91, SD = 1.64) \) versions of the question about the other’s outfit, \( t = -3.36, df = 41, p = .001, \) one-tailed. And, of course, the overall scale mean for all AAC versions \( (13.14, SD = 3.96) \) was significantly greater than for non-AAC versions \( (8.19, SD = 3.82), t = \)
-4.17, \( df = 41, \ p < .0001 \), one-tailed. Taken together, these participant perceptions of the scenarios and questions used in this study suggest that the manipulations of the two key situational independent variables were efficacious.

**Self-Monitoring**

After participants had responded to all scenario questions, the remaining independent variable was assessed through the administration of Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) Revised Self-Monitoring Scale. This thirteen-item scale has demonstrated improved validity over the initial Self-Monitoring Scale, as well as acceptable internal reliabilities (Allen, 1996; Dillard & Hunter, 1989; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). For example, in discussing the original development of the scale, Lennox and Wolfe (1984) report an internal consistency of .75. Allen (1996) reports an internal reliability of .82 for his complete sample (ages 16 to 82), although a lower alpha for the youngest age group in that sample (.71). Internal reliability in the present study, as measured with Cronbach’s alpha, was .73, with scores ranging from 20 to 61 (\( M = 44.23, \ SD = 6.58 \)).

**Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable, degree of interpersonal equivocation, was measured according to the scale values participants gave to the forced-choice responses available. A forced-choice technique was employed by Bavelas (1983,
1985; Bavelas et al., 1990a) when the primary concern, as in the present study, was to help establish experimentally a set of precursors to equivocation, rather than on how individuals actually compose equivocal messages themselves.

Each question had a set of four possible responses, which were designed to be both realistic and to reflect varying degrees of equivocation. (See Appendix.) In their construction, the four key dimensions of equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990a; Bavelas & Smith, 1982; Haley, 1959) were taken into account. These dimensions are content (Just what is being said?), sender (Precisely who is responsible for the message?), receiver (To precisely whom is the message directed?), and context (To what extent does the message answer an explicit or implied question, that is, how related is it to the topic of discussion?). For example, the message "Sam, some people say it is raining outside," in response to a question from Sam about one's hair style, would be more equivocal on the context and sender dimensions, while being less equivocal on the content and receiver dimensions. In order to insure the validity of the measure, a panel of four judges trained in the equivocation concept (including its dimensions) were asked to rank order all of the responses to each question from least to most equivocal. An average intercoder reliability for this ranking, which was quite strong, was computed for all possible combinations of coder pairs.
(Scott's pi = .95). In addition, they were asked to scale each of the responses from 1 ("very clear") to 7 ("very equivocal"). Here, an average interrater reliability, also quite strong, was computed for all possible judge combinations (Pearson's r = .91). These results suggest solid content validity for the sets of possible responses that underlie the measurement of equivocation in the present study.

In addition, these judges' equivocation rankings for the responses formed the basis of an equivocation score for participants. Specifically, each participant was asked to indicate how likely they would be to use each of the possible responses to a given scenario (on a scale ranging from 1, very unlikely, to 7, very likely). (See Appendix.) Then, each participant's scale value for likelihood of use of the least equivocal response (according to judges' rankings) counted as the participant's equivocation score for any given scenario. The scale values were reverse coded so that higher scale values suggested more equivocation. In other words, if participants indicated that they would be likely (or unlikely) to use the least equivocal response, their equivocation score was low (or high). For example, if a given participant circled a six for likelihood of use of the statement "I think your outfit suits you well--it looks really good" (the least equivocal response to the non-AAC version of the outfit question),
that six was reverse coded to produce an equivocation score of two, indicating relatively low equivocation on that scenario. Also, a total equivocation score for each participant was calculated by summing all of that participant's equivocation scores across scenarios. Internal consistency of this overall measure of equivocation, using Cronbach's alpha, was .63. Item-total correlations were similar for all three items, ranging from .42 to .44. Likelihood of use values for the least equivocal choices were used on the rationale that the clearest, most straightforward answer to a scenario question should serve as a baseline. If people want to be clear, there are relatively few ways to do so. Therefore, in situations that call for clarity there should be agreement about the use of the clearest alternative. But if the situation suggests equivocation, there should be less agreement about how much equivocation and what form it should take, even though there would likely be agreement that the least equivocal choice should be eschewed.

Procedure

The necessary survey instruments, taking 15 to 20 minutes to complete, were administered within the classroom setting. Participants were asked for their assistance in a study on interpersonal communication, and were told that if they decided not to participate they should simply return an unmarked questionnaire. The written survey directions
were explained before actual administration. To insure random assignment, the order of treatment combinations (formal/AAC, formal/nonAAC, informal/AAC, or informal/nonAAC) was varied. Also, to avoid response bias, both the order of scenarios and the order of possible responses were varied. In addition to responding to the scenarios described above, participants also indicated their gender, age, classification, and major.

No extra credit of any kind (or other incentive) was offered for participation. Once administration was complete, participants' questions were fully answered.

A Note About Method

The fundamental method used here involved having participants give forced-choice responses to a series of three hypothetical interpersonal scenarios, through which the variables of formality level and presence or absence of AAC were manipulated. This approach is similar to the method used recently by Edwards and others in researching people’s interpretations of ambiguous messages (Edwards, 1998; Edwards et al., 1998) and by Bello (1995, 1998). In essence, this method involves inducing imagined interactions within participants. Imagined interactions have been defined as the "process of social cognition whereby actors imagine themselves in anticipated or recently recalled interaction with others" (Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1989a). Imagined interactions have
been studied, by Honeycutt and others, both as naturally occurring phenomena and as experimentally induced experiences (e.g., Allen & Honeycutt, 1997; Honeycutt, 1989; Honeycutt & Gotcher, 1990; Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1989b). For example, research has shown that inducing an imagined interaction as an aid in planning for an impending encounter reduces the number of object adaptors (as a nonverbal signal of anxiety) displayed during the encounter (Allen & Honeycutt, 1997).

Admittedly, some researchers have expressed concerns about reliance upon a limited number of messages (e.g., interpersonal scenarios) when generalizing about the impact of certain characteristics of those messages (e.g., Jackson & Jacobs, 1983). Their primary concern revolves around the possibility that reactions to such messages might represent little more than specific, unique cases that are related to the chosen messages only. On the other hand, Bradac (1983) has countered that this "language as fixed effect" problem has not led to as many inconsistent results as one might expect. He cites, for example, the consistent outcomes of studies on topics such as lexical diversity's relationship to communicator competence, the ratings of language produced by males versus females, and the perceptions of communicators who use nonstandard dialects. To that list could also be added the consistency of the finding that AAC produces equivocal responses, which has been shown to be
true regardless of gender, topic of AAC-inducing message, or communication channel (Bavelas et al., 1990a). And yet, it is important to note that this line of research on AAC and equivocation started (just as the present study is starting) with a limited number of scenarios involving only one channel of communication. The Bavelas group then built upon its early findings that suggested a connection between AAC and equivocation, showing over time and through several experiments that the basic finding had validity across channels, messages, etc. (Bavelas et al., 1990a).

Hopefully, in a similar fashion, the findings of the present study can (over time) be replicated and extended across a variety of interpersonal settings. Bradac (1983) also suggests that it is often necessary for researchers to take this gradual approach (rather than to include numerous instantiations of messages within a single design) because, in the real world, the resources available to these researchers are limited.

Another potential concern about the scenario method employed in this study has to do with the realism (or lack thereof) of using hypothetical situations as opposed to observing and reporting on actual communication behavior. While the data gathered using this hypothetical method lacks the richness of data derived from communication that has real consequences, it is arguable that (especially in the early stages of theory testing--see Hewes, 1983) this
method may be preferable precisely because the manipulation of variables can be said to have less of an impact on participants. In other words, if the theory is given support using even this more "conservative" method, which also maximizes internal validity (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1990), it is likely that the variables concerned would have even more of an impact in the expected direction when they occur in more realistic, natural settings. Once the basic tenets of a theory are supported or clarified, then more naturalistic observations can be made that provide richer data and that add to the external validity (including ecological validity) of the theory.

Data Analysis

The 2 X 2 design of the categorical independent variables (formality level and presence or absence of AAC) suggests the use of analysis of variance (ANOVA). The first hypothesis, that participants will equivocate more in AAC situations than in non-AAC situations, could be tested by examining the main effect for AAC in an ANOVA. The second hypothesis predicts that formality level and AAC will interact to produce the most disparate equivocation from the formal AAC condition to the formal non-AAC condition, also testable using an ANOVA model.

However, the addition of a key quantitative independent variable (SM) makes analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), a combination of ANOVA and linear regression, the
preferred statistical procedure (Agresti & Finlay, 1997; Glass & Hopkins, 1996), especially considering that there are other hypotheses and a research question involving interactions with SM. This procedure allows for the examination of the influence of a quantitative independent variable (in this case, SM) upon a dependent variable (equivocation) at any particular level of qualitative independent variables within the design (formality v. informality and AAC v. non-AAC). Therefore, an ANCOVA model was constructed that included both categorical independent variables along with the SM covariate as an independent variable, looking for main effects of each variable as well as all possible two-way and three-way interactions. This model was tested for each of the three equivocation scores associated with each scenario question (as dependent variables) and for the total equivocation score (as dependent variable) computed by summing across the three individual scores.

Pilot Study

In order to develop some sense of the workability of the methods described here, a limited pilot study was conducted. Forty-three students in speech communication and other classes at Nicholls State University participated.

Because the greatest variance in equivocation was expected between the formal AAC condition and the formal
non-AAC condition, the study was limited to these two treatments. All participants responded to either the three formal scenarios with AAC inducing questions or to the same three formal scenarios with non-AAC inducing questions. The order of the scenarios on the questionnaire, as well as of the possible responses to each scenario, was varied so as to avoid response bias. Equivocation scores for each scenario, as well as a total equivocation score (using the procedures described previously), were computed for each participant. Because only two of the four possible combinations of the categorical independent variables were employed, simple t-tests were used to compare equivocation means.

Results were encouraging. For the question dealing with enjoyment of one's job, those in the formal non-AAC treatment equivocated significantly less (M = 1.83) than those in the formal AAC treatment (M = 5.20), t = -7.19, df = 41, p < .0001, one-tailed. In the case of the question concerning another's outfit, the results were similar: the formal non-AAC mean was 1.91, while the formal AAC mean was 4.90, t = -6.21, df = 41, p < .0001, one-tailed. However, the question about GPA did not produce significant differences between treatment groups, although the results were in the predicted direction.

Total equivocation differences (M = 5.87 v. M = 12.65) were also strongly significant in the expected direction, t
\[ t = -6.45, df = 41, p < .0001, \text{ one-tailed.} \]

Internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for all three scenario questions combined was .70. This alpha value would have been stronger were it not for the GPA scenario question. Its item-total correlation (.31) was by far the weakest of all three scenarios. One explanation might be that a 2.25 GPA (which was used for the AAC version in the pilot study) is simply not weak enough to promote much AAC. In an attempt to improve this situation, therefore, the revised question shown in the appendix uses a lower GPA, at 1.85.

The following chapter reports the results of the testing procedures outlined above, focusing on what the ANCOVA model results suggest about the validity of each of the hypotheses proposed and about the answer to the research question.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reports, first of all, on findings regarding each of the proposed hypotheses and the research question, including the results of some additional tests designed to clarify the nature of these findings. Second, the results of some post hoc analyses, designed to examine the possible influence of intervening variables, are reported.

An a priori power analysis showed that, for an ANCOVA with an $N$ of 247 and the requisite degrees of freedom (see below), sufficient statistical power was available for detecting relatively small effects. This power ranged from .60 for an effect size of .02 to .94 for an effect size of .05 (Faul & Erdfelder, 1992).

Hypotheses and Research Question

Hypothesis One

The first hypothesis predicted that participants responding to interpersonal situations that invoked AAC would equivocate more than participants responding to non-AAC situations. This hypothesis was strongly supported, lending additional credence to the aspect of the Bavelas group’s theory which claims that AAC is a sufficient cause of equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990a). More specifically, the hypothesis was supported for each of the individual scenario questions, as well as for the overall equivocation score (sum across scenario questions). Of the
three individual items, the scenario question that dealt with the other's outfit (see Appendix) produced the strongest finding, $F(1, 239) = 109.80, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .32$, possibly because this was the only question that, in the AAC condition, dealt with face concerns for other (as opposed to self). In the case of the scenario question concerning one's off-campus job (see Appendix), the results were also strong, but explained less variance, $F(1, 239) = 38.31, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .14$. Results for the scenario question dealing with one's GPA (see Appendix) were also significant, $F(1, 239) = 27.74, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .10$, but the least strong of the three questions. Finally, results for the total equivocation score were impressive, $F(1, 239) = 106.68, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .31$. (See Table 1 for AAC versus non-AAC means with standard deviations for each question and for the total.)

Table 1

Equivocation Mean Scores by AAC Condition (With Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AAC</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (n=125)</td>
<td>Yes (n=122)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA Question</td>
<td>2.29 (1.85)</td>
<td>3.64 (2.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Question</td>
<td>2.09 (1.43)</td>
<td>3.53 (2.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outfit Question</td>
<td>1.93 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.27 (2.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.30 (3.33)</td>
<td>11.44 (4.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis, that formality level and AAC would interact so that participants would equivocate the most in formal AAC situations and the least in formal non-AAC situations, was also supported, $F(1, 239) = 5.88, p = .008$ (one-tailed), $\eta^2 = .024$. This overall result shows, as expected, that most equivocation occurred in formal situations with AAC ($M = 12.29$), while formality had a converse effect when AAC was not present, dropping equivocation to its lowest level ($M = 6.06$). Mean scores for equivocation were distributed precisely as expected across the four treatment cells. (See Table 2 for all means with standard deviations.) Of the individual questions, the off-campus job item produced significant results for this interaction, $F(1, 239) = 7.56, p = .002$ (one-tailed), $\eta^2 = .03$. In response to this question, participants equivocated the most in the formal AAC condition ($M = 4.02$), while equivocating the least in the formal non-AAC condition ($M = 1.97$) and at somewhat more moderate levels in informal conditions.

For two of the individual scenario questions, the interaction between formality level and AAC did not reach statistical significance: for GPA question, $F(1, 239) = 1.04, p = .31$; for outfit question, $F(1, 239) = 1.84, p = .18$. However, examining cell means suggests the anticipated trend (Table 2). For two of the three scenario
questions (off-campus job and GPA), the treatment cell with the least equivocation, as expected, was the formal non-AAC condition. In addition, for two of the questions (off-campus job and outfit) the cell containing the most equivocation, also as expected, was the formal AAC condition, while in the third case (GPA question) this same cell was virtually tied with another (informal AAC) for most equivocation. Such a general trend likely contributed to the finding of a significant formality level by AAC interaction for the total equivocation score (see above).

Overall, then, these results regarding the second hypothesis at least suggest the possibility that factors other than AAC (in this case, formality level of one's interpersonal situation) are at work (in conjunction with AAC) in influencing how much a person equivocates. That is, the results reported so far indicate that, while AAC is almost certainly a sufficient cause of interpersonal equivocation (note direction and strength of findings on first hypothesis), it does not tell the whole story of equivocation.

**Hypothesis Three, Hypothesis Four, Research Question**

Neither of the hypotheses that involved interactions of SM with the situational factors were supported. The third hypothesis predicted that the difference in equivocation between AAC and non-AAC situations would be greater for high SMs than for low SMs, presumably because
Table 2

Equivocation Mean Scores by Formality Level and AAC (With Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Formality Level</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AAC</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA Question</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.56 (1.98)</td>
<td>2.02 (1.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.69 (2.24)</td>
<td>3.59 (2.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Question</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.21 (1.39)</td>
<td>1.97 (1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.02 (2.11)</td>
<td>4.02 (2.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outfit Question</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.77 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.08 (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.83 (2.04)</td>
<td>4.68 (2.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Equiv.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.55 (3.33)</td>
<td>6.06 (3.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10.54 (4.69)</td>
<td>12.29 (4.33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

higher SMs should be more attuned to a situational element like the presence or absence of AAC and respond accordingly. However, the ANCOVA result for this interaction was not supported for the overall equivocation.
score, $F(1, 239) = .19$, $p = .66$, nor for any of the individual question items. The fourth hypothesis proposed a three-way interaction such that the difference in equivocation between formal AAC and formal non-AAC conditions (supported second hypothesis—see above) would be greater as SM increased. Again, overall equivocation results were not significant for such an interaction, $F(1, 239) = .50$, $p = .48$, and neither were any findings regarding individual questions.

The answer to the one research question posed, which dealt with how SM and formality level might interact to influence the degree of equivocation, is inconclusive. For the combined equivocation score, the result regarding the interaction of these two variables was not significant, $F(1, 239) = 1.48$, $p = .23$. Also, no results were significant for any of the individual question items.

However, since the ANCOVA model tested for all main and interactive effects of the key variables involved, a significant finding regarding SM, though not hypothesized, did emerge. For two of the individual question items, and for the combined equivocation measure, SM was shown to have a main effect upon equivocation. This relationship was an inverse one, with higher SM resulting in less equivocation. The finding was true for the GPA question item, $F(1, 239) = 5.39$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .022$, and was near significance for the outfit item, $F(1, 239) = 3.36$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .015$. 

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For the overall measure, $F(1, 239) = 7.06$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .029$. ANCOVA results routinely display correlations between quantitative covariates (in this case, SM) and the dependent variable for each of the $2 \times 2$ factor treatment cells. These correlations are shown in Table 3. An inspection of the correlations shows that, for the outfit question, they are negative in three of the four treatment cells, while for the GPA question the correlations are negative in all of the cells. And for the overall measure of equivocation, the correlations between SM and equivocation are, again, negative across all of the treatment cells. In other words, there was a consistent (if not particularly strong) tendency for higher SMs to equivocate less no matter what combination of AAC or formality conditions they happened to be in.

As a method for cross-checking and shedding additional light on this surprising finding, supplemental analyses were performed. First, a general factorial ANOVA including AAC and formality level as factors, with SM as a quantitative covariate but with no SM interactions as a part of the model, was used to render a regression coefficient for total (combined) equivocation on SM. This model’s results demonstrated, as already shown, a significant main effect for AAC, $F(1, 242) = 112.49$, $p < .0001$, and a significant AAC by formality interaction, $F(1, 242) = 5.90$, $p = .016$. Of more interest, it confirmed the
Table 3

Correlations Between SM and Equivocation for Each of the Factorial Treatment Cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formality Level</th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>-.264</td>
<td>-.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-.099</td>
<td>-.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>-.143</td>
<td>-.178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-.146</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outfit Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>-.287</td>
<td>.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-.139</td>
<td>-.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Equiv.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>-.328</td>
<td>-.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-.173</td>
<td>-.188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main effect result for SM with a significant coefficient, $B = -.11$, $\beta = -.151$, $t = -2.82$, $p = .005$. The interpretation of the unstandardized coefficient is that for every one unit rise in SM, there is on average a .11
lower score on overall equivocation, which gives us a somewhat clearer idea of the nature of the relationship.

Second, so that the trend could be analyzed in terms of mean equivocation scores, SM scores were partitioned into three levels representing low SM (scores more than one-half standard deviation below the mean, \( n = 69 \)), moderate SM (scores within one-half standard deviation of the mean, \( n = 106 \)), and high SM (scores more than one-half standard deviation above the mean, \( n = 72 \)). A full factorial ANOVA employing these SM groups, along with AAC and formality level as the other factors (and overall equivocation as the dependent variable), produced the already expected significant results for AAC and formality, with a result that approached significance for SM, \( F(2, 235) = 2.64, p = .07, \eta^2 = .022 \). An examination of the twelve treatment cell equivocation means resulting from this analysis shows, for each of the combinations of formality level and AAC, a generally downward mean trend from the low SM group to the high SM group (Table 4), again allowing a glimpse of the nature of the main effect for SM.

Finally, in order to obtain a method of visually comparing the two key main effect findings of this study, the SPSS graphs function was used to fit lines depicting the relationship between AAC and total equivocation, as well as between SM and total equivocation. These graphic relationships are displayed in Figure 1, giving a sense of
Table 4

Overall Equivocation Mean Scores for SM Groups as a Function of Formality Level and AAC (With Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAC</th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low SM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.77 (3.95)</td>
<td>6.85 (4.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.12 (4.09)</td>
<td>12.60 (5.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mod. SM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.63 (2.94)</td>
<td>5.61 (2.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.04 (4.27)</td>
<td>12.85 (3.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High SM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5.00 (2.88)</td>
<td>5.87 (3.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9.00 (5.89)</td>
<td>11.71 (4.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the difference in magnitude of the two effects. (Note that because AAC is a categorical variable, no scatter of data points is depicted in the first graph.)

An explanation for why this SM main effect materialized, instead of the expected SM interactions, is offered in the next chapter along with discussion of the study’s other key findings.

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Figure 1. Fitted lines showing relationship between AAC and overall equivocation, and between SM and overall equivocation.
The only other significant finding that emerged from the basic ANCOVA model was that, for the outfit question item only, there was a main effect of formality level, $F(1, 239) = 6.62$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .027$. In response to this scenario question, participants equivocated more in the formal condition ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 2.25$) than in the informal condition ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.98$). The direction of this finding was a bit surprising, especially considering the earlier findings of Bello (1995) (using a design in which AAC was excluded) demonstrating more equivocation in informal than in formal situations.

Other Analyses

Additional post hoc analyses, designed mainly to look for the possibility of the influence of intervening variables, revealed the following. One-way ANOVA suggested no relationship between student classification and overall equivocation, $F(3, 238) = .11$, $p = .96$, nor between classification and any of the individual scenario questions. Also, Pearson’s product-moment correlation revealed no relationship between age and overall equivocation ($r = -.01$, $p = .84$). Neither was there a significant age-equivocation correlation for any individual question item. For these reasons, neither of these variables was included in the general factorial ANCOVA model.
However, because a preliminary analysis did suggest the possibility of a gender difference in overall equivocation, $t(244) = -1.61, p = .109$ (two-tailed), a decision was made to construct an ANCOVA model that included gender as an additional factor. This model continued to produce significant results, with overall equivocation as the dependent variable, for the key findings mentioned so far (effect of AAC, effect of SM, and AAC X formality interaction), but also produced some interesting gender results. First, there was a main effect for gender, $F(1, 231) = 3.98, p = .047, \eta^2 = .017$, with males ($M = 9.44, SD = 5.01$) equivocating more than females ($M = 8.45, SD = 4.55$) overall. Second, gender and SM interacted to influence equivocation, $F(1, 231) = 4.47, p = .036, \eta^2 = .02$. That is, although males equivocated more overall, the inverse relationship between SM and equivocation was more true for males ($r = -.32$) than for females ($r = -.11$): high SM males were less prone to equivocation than high SM females. This finding is complicated, in addition, by a three-way interaction involving gender, SM, and formality level, $F(1, 231) = 4.86, p = .029, \eta^2 = .02$. The stronger tendency for high SM males to equivocate less (the two-way interaction) is particularly true in formal situations ($r = -.42$), while in these formal situations the SM-equivocation relationship is slightly positive ($r = .10$) for females.
This chapter has reported on findings directly related to the hypotheses and research question posed in the previous chapter, suggesting mixed results. In addition, it has described unexpected findings related to SM and equivocation, plus some additional analyses associated with the role that gender might play in equivocation. The final chapter discusses and interprets these findings, focusing especially on those most directly concerned with the theoretic rationale laid out earlier in this study.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, the primary concern is with analyzing the meaning and implications of the key findings reported in chapter four. First, interpretations of the results supporting hypotheses one and two are presented. Second, analysis is offered of the surprising inverse relationship uncovered between SM and equivocation, including why it apparently overshadowed the predicted interactions involving SM. Third, the chapter briefly discusses some of the additional, post hoc findings concerning gender, focusing mainly upon implications for further research. Finally, a concluding section discusses some limitations of the study and additional suggestions for research.

Support for Hypotheses

Support for the first hypothesis, which involved the well-established finding of the Bavelas group (e.g., Bavelas et al., 1990a) that AAC leads to equivocation, came as no surprise, except perhaps for the relatively weaker finding (of the three) for the scenario question dealing with one’s GPA. This finding might be explained by the notion that there are some pressures against equivocation during a job interview (the formal setting for the GPA question), where the interviewee knows that transcripts will likely be checked and that, if hired, one will likely have a working relationship with the interviewer (Robinson et al., 1998). This possibility is supported by an
examination of the 2 X 2 (formality level by AAC) cell means, which show that the GPA question is the only one of the three that did not produce the strongest equivocation in the formal AAC condition (see Table 2).

With regard to the general finding on AAC, there are a few key implications associated with the particular methodology of the present study. First, it is important to note the strength of the finding, evidenced by its consistency across scenario questions and for the overall measure of equivocation, as well as by the strength of association measures reported. For example, $\eta^2$ ranged from .10 to .32 for the individual question responses, with an overall equivocation $\eta^2$ of .31. Although it was fairly obvious from the consistency of the Bavelas group’s findings spanning several years (e.g., Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas, 1985; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bavelas et al., 1988; Bavelas et al., 1990a) that the influence of AAC on equivocation was a powerful one, the Bavelas group used either chi$^2$ tests (for their nominal data) or t-tests (for interval data), and did not directly report measures of strength of association. The reporting of such measures in the present study, therefore, gives us a clearer sense of just how powerful the AAC-equivocation relationship is. And, at the same time, such findings show that there is variance associated with interpersonal equivocation that is yet to be explained, although this study’s additional
findings (support for second hypothesis and others) begin to do just that.

The second set of implications has to do with the nature of the methodology itself. Having participants scale sets of validly prepared responses for likelihood of use is significantly less time-consuming, less laborious, and uses fewer resources than the scaling (for equivocation level) of spontaneously produced responses, a methodology used almost exclusively by the Bavelas group (see Bavelas et al., 1990a) and earlier by Bello (1998). Yet, if this simpler and more efficient method can produce significant results in equivocation research, attested to by support for hypothesis one (and other key findings—see previous chapter), its use should be encouraged and likely will lead to more widespread research about interpersonal equivocation (Bello & Edwards, 1999).

The Bavelas group trained judges over extended periods of time (multiple individual sessions) in both the dimensions of equivocation and the specific method of scaling used (Bavelas & Smith, 1982; Bavelas et al., 1990a), resulting in reported interrater reliabilities that were quite high, usually above .90 and almost always above .80 (Bavelas et al., 1990a). The present study, on the other hand, used a panel of five judges briefly trained in equivocation and its dimensions (one session), and yet both measures of interjudge reliability used were also high.
(above .90—see chapter three). Such similar results using a more efficient method provide further evidence that the current technique has promise, but only continued research using the technique (and producing theoretically interesting and significant results) will confirm its validity and utility.

Support for the second hypothesis, that there would be an interactive effect of formality level and AAC in influencing equivocation, lends credence to the rationale laid out earlier that the increased social distance and focus on a central conversational theme which characterizes formal social situations (Irvine, 1979) should make communicative mistakes less easy to repair (compared to informal situations), meaning that the consequences of not neutralizing an AAC bind (through equivocation) in formal settings should be more dire than in informal settings. Apparently, this concern resulted in, as hypothesized, the greatest degree of equivocation in formal situations with AAC, while concerns about goodness-of-fit between the focused nature of formal settings and language use (Bello, 1995) led to the lowest equivocation in formal situations with no AAC. Of course, as the previous chapter points out, this finding was neither as consistent nor as strong as the main effect for AAC, nor was it expected to be considering the research history proving the powerful and pervasive influence of AAC alone (Bavelas et al., 1990a).
And, yet, the finding does just as clearly suggest that there are additional (if subtle) situational influences on the occurrence of interpersonal equivocation, factors that explain some degree more of its variance. The finding is also intriguing in that it gives evidence of the notion that, as first mentioned in chapter one, people might very well equivocate in more subtle ways and in response to more subtle factors than the mere presence or absence of AAC would imply. There appear to be concerns that communicators have about the management and fine tuning of interaction itself, as suggested by shifts in equivocation from one combination of formality level and AAC to another, in addition to the more blatant face-saving and information manipulation concerns suggested by strictly AAC-based equivocation.

The question might legitimately be asked: does the interactive effect indicate that formal settings made AAC more salient to participants, or is it more accurate to say that combining formality with AAC actually increased the degree of AAC as experienced by participants? This study does not give a definitive answer to that question, although previous research (Bello, 1995) suggesting a unique role for formality level in influencing equivocation, as well as the rationale given earlier for the hypothesis, would imply that the former is more likely. As previously pointed out, the characteristics of formal
settings (Irvine, 1978, 1979) should make communicative mistakes less easy to repair, thus suggesting the particular importance of avoiding either side of an AAC bind within such formal settings. Note that, for example, in the AAC condition simply changing the setting from informal to formal resulted in more overall equivocation ($M = 10.54$ versus $M = 12.29$) in response to the very same AAC-provoking questions. And yet, these same characteristics suggest the relevance of precision in formal settings that lack AAC (Little & Gelles, 1972). The key point is that, whether formal settings can be said to make AAC more relevant or to increase AAC, the present study (along with Bello, 1998) confirms that formality level has a role to play (directly, indirectly, or both) in predicting and explaining how much (or how little) people equivocate. The research of the Bavelas group made no distinction between AAC in formal versus informal settings; the present study does make such a distinction, and shows that the distinction matters.

As already mentioned, this study's results tend to confirm those of Bello (1998), but have the advantage of being arrived at through a much less labor-intensive methodology which, therefore, shows promise as a way of stimulating research interest into the causes of equivocation. In addition, the present study used substantially more participants than did Bello (1998), as
well as several judges for establishing the degree of equivocation of response choices, thereby lending enhanced external and measurement (content) validity to the results (Smith, 1988).

Self-Monitoring and Equivocation

As reported in the previous chapter, none of the hypothesized interactions involving SM materialized in this study, and yet surprisingly, support was found for a main effect relationship between SM and equivocation. At first glance, SM theory and research would seem to offer little in the way of an explanation for such a finding, especially considering that the heart of the SM construct involves differences in how people attend to aspects of the communicative situation (and thus the hypothesized interactions). However, on closer inspection, it is possible to offer a theoretic interpretation as to why higher SM participants equivocated less than lower SMs.

AAC is likely such an overwhelming situational component (again, as suggested by the strength and consistency of support for the first hypothesis and previous research of the Bavelas group) that it was not attended to or reacted to differentially by high versus low SMs. In other words, AAC is such an obtrusive element of a social situation, when it occurs, that being a high SM is simply not an advantage in noticing it and dealing with it: virtually everyone is able to detect it and likely responds
to it with at least some heightened equivocation. Hence, neither the expected two-way nor three-way interactions involving SM with AAC and formality appeared. In the case of the research question concerning whether high SMs might equivocate differently from formal to informal situations, recall that (in chapter two) the rationale for this question included the possibility that the strong and predominant effects of AAC might wash out any potential interaction here. This might very well have been what happened, since examining the SM-equivocation correlations for each treatment cell shows that although there was a substantial difference from formal (-.05) to informal (-.33) situations when AAC was absent, this difference virtually disappeared when AAC was present (see, again, Table 3). It seems conceivable, then, that an experimental design that excluded AAC as a factor might well turn up a significant SM X formality level interaction. Whatever the case, there is no denying that the relationship between SM and equivocation was consistently negative across treatment cells and, hence, the main effect for SM. Although both high and low SMs reacted "appropriately" to the presence or absence of AAC (i.e., consistent with the AAC main effect), high SMs equivocated at a particularly low level in non-AAC situations and at a relatively lower level than low SMs in AAC situations (although still with more equivocation than in non-AAC settings). In essence, they equivocated

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somewhat less than low SMs whether the overall level of equivocation was strong (AAC) or weak (non-AAC).

What might this SM main effect mean? The most plausible explanation appears to be that high SMs are better attuned to the salience of Grice's Cooperative Principle, a part of his pragmatic theory of conversation (Grice, 1975, 1981). This principle suggests that people make a fundamental assumption that, generally speaking, conversations are cooperative endeavors in which the parties involved attempt to adhere to four maxims: manner (be clear and direct), relation (be relevant), quality (be truthful), and quantity (be informative). The Cooperative Principle can be viewed, then, as a kind of meta-situational component in the sense that it generally applies across conversational settings and contexts. It has been used previously to help explain why communicators in general, and particularly those low in ambiguity tolerance, prefer less equivocation in more formal settings when AAC is absent (Bello, 1995). SM includes an other-directedness component in the original theory (Snyder, 1974) and as an element of the revised scale (sensitivity to the behavior of others--see Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). It appears plausible, then, that high SMs likely hold in higher regard the significance of the norms implied by the Cooperative Principle (in particular the manner and quality maxims), especially since those norms seem to assume the
necessity of recognizing the role of the other and one's duty toward the other in making conversation work effectively. In other words, perhaps high SMs are more attuned to the constraints implied by this over-arching, meta-situational principle. If that is indeed the case, they would then also be more likely to view equivocation as an abrogation of that principle (i.e., as a kind of conversational error--see chapter one), resulting in less overall equivocation by them.

More specifically, high SMs should be more motivated (and apparently were in this study) to keep equivocation to some minimum even when there are situational elements present (e.g., AAC) that work against the norms generally adhered to. High SMs and low SMs alike, in other words, recognize the fact that AAC overrides the Cooperative Principle (especially its implied norm of directness), and they are willing to accept this temporary skirting of the principle because of the pressing face-saving concerns present. Yet, high SMs apparently attempt to mitigate this necessary abrogation of the Cooperative Principle as much as possible, as evidenced by their relatively lower levels of equivocation (compared to low SMs) in AAC situations. And in the case of non-AAC situations, they apparently follow more strictly the Cooperative Principle that is fully in place and intact in such situations. That is, when no AAC is present, high SMs more completely follow the
situational conversation norm that says "be direct, clear, relevant," as evidenced by their particularly low equivocation (compared to low SMs) in such settings.

In essence, then, high SMs more fully recognize the validity of the Cooperative Principle, so that in non-AAC situations they choose the clearest possible communication and in AAC situations they attempt to minimize the heightened equivocation that certainly does occur. When viewed in this manner, the SM-equivocation relationship uncovered here is actually consistent with SM theory and research (reviewed in chapter one) which paints a picture of high SMs as more aware, adaptive, and competent communicators. To the degree that high SMs are considered conversationally (e.g., Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987; Douglas, 1983, 1984) and relationally (e.g., Hample & Dallinger, 1987; Montgomery, et al., 1987) competent, perhaps they view excessive equivocation not only as conversational error, but as a kind of relationship error that should be eliminated where it can and minimized where it cannot be eliminated, evidenced to some degree by the stronger inverse correlations between SM and equivocation in informal settings, particularly the informal non-AAC treatment cell (though, as discussed above, this trend, perhaps due to experimental design reasons, did not reach significance as a SM X formality level interaction). As one example, high SMs may have felt more compelled to give
direct compliments to those friends whose outfits looked good, as well as compelled to be somewhat more direct with friends in bad looking outfits (on the theory that those friends could handle and might benefit from a somewhat less equivocal response). In other words, high SMs appear to recognize both the need for particularly direct communication when the situation allows for it, as well as the fact that situational forces (such as AAC) that call for equivocation do not necessarily imply a need for the most extreme equivocation possible. One possibility suggested by previous research on the importance of physical appearance to high SMs (Harnish & Sullivan, 1987) is that perhaps high SMs use verbal equivocation less because they are able to imagine themselves concurrently using appropriate nonverbals to soften messages. However accomplished, high SMs appear more attuned than low SMs to balancing situational contexts with meta-situational norms.

Implications of Other Findings

The main and interactive effects involving gender are certainly intriguing, but as strictly post hoc findings lacking any theoretical rationale, it is probably best merely to emphasize that they do suggest the need for even more research into the causes of interpersonal equivocation.

The fact that males equivocated more overall in this study raises some interesting questions that might be used
to guide further research on this issue. How, for example, would previous research on the gender-linked language effect (Mulac, Incontro, & James, 1985; Mulac & Lundell, 1986; Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988) inform and/or help to explain such a finding, provided it is confirmed in future research? How, if at all, do perceived differences in dynamism and aesthetic quality between male and female speakers relate to possible equivocation differences? Another interesting question involves the role that nonverbals, as suggested above regarding SM, might play here. Perhaps, for example, females equivocated less overall in part because they are better able to imagine themselves using appropriate nonverbals (such as smiling) to soften the blow of more verbally direct messages, whereas men are more likely to use verbal equivocation itself to soften difficult messages.

The two-way interaction uncovered here between gender and SM suggests that high SM males were less comfortable with equivocation than high SM females. In other words, the inverse relationship between SM and equivocation (discussed above) was more salient to males than to females. Perhaps high SM females, for whatever reason, were less concerned about violating the norms implied by the Cooperative Principle, and especially so in formal situations, as evidenced by the three-way interaction
between gender, SM, and formality level (see previous chapter). Indeed, the most striking gender difference in the SM-equivocation relationship was seen in formal settings, where high SM males were particularly concerned about equivocating less and high SM females were a bit more likely to equivocate.

How might SM theory be used to help confirm and explain these gender differences? Why would high SM males and females be so differentially attuned to formal settings as context for equivocation? Researchers might consider tackling these and other questions relevant to possible gender effects in interpersonal equivocation.

Conclusion

Finally, some limitations of this study, along with a few additional suggestions for future research and a summary of theoretical implications, are presented.

Limitations

First, with regard to the basic method used herein, it admittedly does not do justice to issues associated with the nuances of how communicators actually construct more or less equivocal messages, but this admission might simply represent one of the "trade-offs" that Bradac (1983, p. 183) has suggested communication researchers inevitably must make. In this case, the trade-off seems warranted, and probably would be warranted in many conceivable research projects where the focus (as in the present study)
would be on a fuller understanding of the causes of interpersonal equivocation rather than on its spontaneous construction. There will certainly be cases where the research focus will necessitate a more costly approach involving the scaling of spontaneous messages, but such a method can be reserved for those times when the interest is more on how (than why) people equivocate (see discussion of SM below).

Second, a specific limitation of the technique used for measuring equivocation itself is that the panel of judges did not make separate evaluations of response equivocation for each of the four theoretical dimensions underlying the construct (though the judges were trained in all of them). The reason for this approach was that the decision was made to test only, in examining hypotheses, for degree of equivocation as a general phenomenon. There is no reason, however, why the methodology of this study could not be adapted in future research to test hypotheses related to any or each of the individual dimensions of equivocation, thus teasing out the causes of particular qualities of the equivocation phenomenon.

In addition, a stronger internal consistency for the overall equivocation measure would have been desirable. However, it is important to consider that high alphas are quite difficult to achieve with any measure that employs so few items (Guilford & Fruchter, 1973). This is just one
reason why future research should, if possible, make use of a greater number of instantiations of the independent variables involved. In addition, lower internal reliability for the dependent variable measure, because it signifies a greater degree of error (i.e., random) variance, should work against the achievement of statistical significance (Smith, 1988). And yet this study has produced several statistically significant results, suggesting that if alpha can be raised in future research by the addition of relevant scenarios, findings regarding the precursors of equivocation should be even stronger. Another limitation is that, as is often the case with studies that make use of a college population, the age distribution of the sample was positively skewed. Although no age differences in equivocation were found, that might very well have been because the sample was so heavily weighted with 18 to 21 year olds. Considering that Bello (1995) did find a significant (but relatively weak) inverse correlation between age and equivocation, this factor should probably not be overlooked in future studies. The external validity of the present study's findings, while superior to those of Bello (1998), could certainly be enhanced in future research by the selection of a sample much more representative of the broader population in terms of age.
Future Research

Future research on the relationship of formality level to interpersonal equivocation, whether alone or in tandem with AAC, might legitimately focus on a couple of issues not answered clearly enough by this study. One of these is that careful experimental design might allow for the clarification of the nature of the cognitive impact of combining formal settings with AAC-inducing material, thus helping us to determine whether formality actually enhances the amount of AAC as experienced or acts as a filtering variable (again, cognitively speaking) that heightens awareness of or concern about AAC. Such a design might involve, for example, having participants indicate the content and quality of their mental representations of situations that manipulate AAC and formality level, in addition to their likely communicative responses. Second, at least a couple of the dimensions of the social formality construct (Irvine, 1978, 1979) have been employed in this study to help predict and explain the hypothesized formality X AAC interaction. Yet, it is not clear whether results were attributable mostly to social distance differences between informal settings and formal ones (friends versus strangers/acquaintances as conversational partners) or to the more narrowed thematic focus that formal conversational settings imply. Additional research using the same basic methodology employed here could tease
out these differential influences by, for example, creating scenarios that systematically vary only one dimension of the formality construct at a time.

Because, of course, the main effect finding on SM was not hypothesized, it requires a more refined theoretical underpinning and replication. Also, future studies might, for example, search for differential equivocation of high and low SMs in social situations that invoke self versus other face-saving concerns, especially because the explanation offered here has relied largely on the other-directedness component of SM. The possibility of differences related to self versus other as conversational focus is given some credence by the fact that participants in this study equivocated more in response to the outfit question in the formal condition than in the informal condition (see previous chapter). As the outfit question was the only one of the three for which the primary focus was other rather than self, this finding suggests that in this case participants felt more comfortable being relatively straightforward with a friend (as opposed to someone less familiar), whether the particular version invoked AAC or not. That is, perhaps participants believed that someone closer to them would better appreciate a direct complement about their clothing (non-AAC) than someone distant, and that a friend would also be more receptive to a difficult but somewhat more
straightforward message about their clothing than would a non-friend (AAC). It would also be interesting, using a methodology that gets participants to generate spontaneous responses (as in, e.g., Bavelas, 1985; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bello, 1998), to examine more carefully how high and low SMs equivocate, perhaps using the various maxims of the Cooperative Principle and the dimensions of the equivocation construct as templates.

Theoretical Implications

Particularly if future research can verify the role for SM that this study has suggested, it demonstrates (along with support for the second hypothesis involving formality level) that while AAC is certainly the most powerful predictor of equivocation, it is not the sole influence. One of the key contributions of this study is that it has suggested that there are other legitimate concerns and motivations (besides strictly face-saving ones) that are involved when people equivocate. This fact does not necessarily mean that equivocation ought to be recommended as some sort of routine course of communicative action. But, it does imply that a clearer understanding of the situational and personal circumstances that influence it might make us better prepared, as interactants, to know when we might appropriately expect it from others (as well as least expect it) and appropriately use it ourselves.
This study has helped to confirm the suggestion of earlier research (Bello, 1995, 1998) that AAC is not the "necessary and sufficient" cause of equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990a, p. 262), indeed, that there is no such singular cause. In the process, it has made several key contributions. First, it has more precisely demonstrated the strength of the relationship between AAC and equivocation, and simultaneously suggested that there is as yet unexplained variance in equivocation. Second, it has developed a simpler and more efficient method for studying the antecedents of interpersonal equivocation, a method that it is hoped will prompt renewed research in this area. Third, it has confirmed a distinct role, at least in conjunction with AAC, for level of formality as another situational precursor of equivocation. In general terms, formality has one impact when AAC is present (implying the need for especially strong equivocation) and another when AAC is absent, suggesting a greater need for precision. Next, although in a somewhat unexpected manner, it has suggested that SM as a personality trait is also implicated as a cause of equivocation. In this study, high SMs equivocated less than low SMs, perhaps as a way of balancing concerns for both directness in communication and the necessity of equivocation under some circumstances (such as the presence of AAC). Finally, especially with regard to gender and self versus other situational focus,
this study has strongly implied that there even exist other factors that might add to our understanding of the occurrence of equivocation. In making these contributions, this study has taken at least some tentative steps toward, as hoped, a more complete social cognitive model of the causes of interpersonal equivocation.
References


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Horwich, P. (1995). Meaning, use, and truth: On whether a use-theory of meaning is precluded by the requirement that whatever constitutes the meaning of a predicate be capable of determining the set of things of which the predicate is true and to which it ought to be applied. *Mind, 104*, 355-368.


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Appendix

Questionnaire Scenarios and Questions

Try to imagine the situations described below, as vividly as possible, then read all of the choices for each one. For each choice, indicate how likely it is that you would actually say that (or something similar) by circling the appropriate number on the scale.

Remember, (1) try to really put yourself in each situation, and also (2) limit yourself to the responses given. (3) I am not interested in what you think you should say, but in what you think you might actually say. [Note that, for purposes of clarity, all answers are ordered from least equivocal to most equivocal in this appendix only. Also note that, in addition to the answers, the order of the scenarios themselves will be varied in the actual study.]

Situation 1

You are being interviewed for a job that you really want. So far the interview is progressing well. Take a moment to imagine yourself in the room seated across the desk from the interviewer. [Informal: You are having lunch with a friend in the student union. Take a moment to imagine yourself in these surroundings, with your friend seated at the table with you.]
After a while, the conversation turns to academic performance, and you are asked, "What's your grade point average?" (Assume that your overall GPA is weak, a 1.85.)

A. "I can tell you that my overall grade point average is 1.85."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

Very Unlikely

B. "It's close to 2.0."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

C. "About average, I guess."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

D. "That depends on the semester."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

[Non-AAC: (Assume that your overall GPA is strong, a 3.42.)]

A. "I can tell you that my overall grade point average is 3.42."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

B. "It's above 3.0."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

C. "They tell me it's above 3.0."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

D. "That depends on the semester."

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7
Situation 2

You are attending an elegant dinner as part of a university function. You are seated next to the president of the university, with whom you are talking. Take a moment to imagine yourself there. [Informal: You are enjoying yourself at a party, talking with a friend. Imagine yourself actually there. Envision the room and the people.]

After a while, the conversation turns to recent work experiences, and you are asked, "How have you been enjoying your job?" (Assume that you have had problems with that off-campus job and were fired last week.)

A. "Actually, I've had some problems and was fired last week."

1-2-3-4-5-6-7

B. "Things haven't gone as well as I would like, so I'm not working there any longer."

1-2-3-4-5-6-7

C. "Not as well as a few weeks ago."

1-2-3-4-5-6-7

D. "It's really kind of hard to say."

1-2-3-4-5-6-7

[Non-AAC: (Assume that your off-campus job has been going well and that you've recently received an "Employee-of-the-Month" certificate.)]
A. "Actually, it's going well--I recently received a certificate as employee of the month."

B. "It's going well, I guess, since they just gave me a performance award."

C. "Better than I have in quite a while--they seem to like me."

D. "Things are looking up."

Situation 3

You are being interviewed at the college television station about your experiences in college. Imagine yourself there, with the camera and interviewer nearby. [Informal: You are sitting in a restaurant with a friend, having a lively discussion. Imagine that you are really there.]

After a while, the conversation turns to dress and appearance, and you are asked, "So, honestly, what do you think of this outfit?" (Assume that this person's outfit is awful--it looks really bad.)

A. "I don't think your outfit suits you."
B. "You look fine, but that outfit just isn't you."

C. "It's as nice as some other outfits."

D. "I believe I saw someone else with an outfit like that."

[Non-AAC: (Assume that this person's outfit is well suited to him/her--it looks really good.]]

A. "I think your outfit suits you well--it looks really good."

B. "You look just fine in that outfit."

C. "It's as nice as most other outfits."

D. "I believe I saw someone else with an outfit like that."
Vita

Richard Bello is a native of Baton Rouge and a resident of Labadieville, Louisiana. He received a bachelor of arts degree in political science in 1973 and a master of arts degree in speech communication in 1979, both from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He is an Assistant Professor of Speech at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, where he has taught since 1984. He is to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy during May 1999 commencement ceremonies.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Richard Bello

Major Field: Speech Communication

Title of Dissertation: Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict, Situational Formality, and Personality as Causes of Interpersonal Equivocation

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

March 23, 1999