A Frame Analysis of Favor Seeking in the Renaissance: Agency, Networks, and Political Culture

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Actors invoke and manipulate diverse frames of meaning by assembling cues, taken from linguistic forms laid down in the cultural background, to build their relations with others. This article examines the use of these frames in Renaissance patronage-seeking letters, both quantitatively (through multidimensional scaling) and qualitatively (using discourse analytical concepts), to present an interactionist approach to the presentation of self and, in turn, to political culture. Writing strategies are only modestly predictable on the basis of actors' place in social structure, as actors write from achieved network positions and constantly aim to improve their position, maximize leverage, and build careers through letter writing.

I shall tell you, therefore, first, of what means I made use in order to become an intimate and follower of Gian Galeazzo, the duke of Milan; then I shall tell you how I went about winning the good will of Ladislao, king of Naples; finally I shall recount to you what sort of conduct enabled me to preserve the favor and good will of Pope Giovanni. I think, too, you will be pleased to learn of my various and different devices, my devious and seldom-used means, which have rarely been described. These are most useful ways to deal with men in civic life; therefore listen well to me. (Alberti 1969, p. 252)

I certainly agree, Lionardo, that the things Piero said all seemed to be wise and sound and full of prudence. His subtlety and considerable artistry were also clear to me. . . . But it seems to me that I want some other sort of thread and texture in talk on this subject. . . . You know the truth—how can anyone dream that mere simplicity and goodness will get him friends, or even acquaintances not actually harmful and annoying? . . . The world is amply supplied with fraudulent, false, perfidious, bold, audacious, and rapacious men. Everything in the world is profoundly unsure. . . . To deal with human wickedness in all its boldness, daring, and greed one must be

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able to remain constant, temperate, and full of inner strength. These are the qualities I would like to see actually practiced by a man whose friendship I hoped to gain and enjoy. . . . So there it is; I want to be instructed in this sense concerning friendship, how to obtain it, increase it, diminish it, recover it, and make it permanent. (1969, pp. 264–67)

These passages from Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise, _I libri della famiglia_, written in Florence in the 1430s, pose a perennial problem of social action: how to link strategic agency to cultural meaning or culturally valued ends. In the first passage, Piero Alberti outlines the appropriate forms of behavior and outward signs of honor by which to seduce men of various ranks in life into “friendship.” The logic he expresses to construct personal networks and build a career is instrumentalist: choose the optimal interpersonal practices as means for achieving selfishly desirable ends. Friendship here is merely a means to self-advancement, and Piero provides a set of recipes for fabricating different friendships.

Yet as we see from the second passage, Adovardo Alberti clearly finds this set of recipes problematic, for two reasons. First, Adovardo wants a truer friendship, one based on a relationship with someone who really possesses virtuous qualities. Friendship—a normative commitment and a culturally shaped value—is an end in itself. Secondly, however, Adovardo is all too aware of human duplicity, and Piero’s recipes seem insufficient, perhaps even for obtaining the mechanical forms of friendship he desires. In short, the dilemma is that one must use culturally sanctioned means of gaining advancement. But because these means often breed suspicion about one’s own and others’ sincerity and real interests, interpersonal solidarity begins to unravel. Somehow, practices subtler and less transparent than Piero’s recipes are needed simultaneously to obtain an end we desire—friendship, group membership, social status—and to communicate to others that we “really” value what we say we do.1 Adding to the dilemma is that achievement of a number of different relationships or network positions is not simply an additive process. We sometimes have to extricate ourselves from certain relationships we have achieved in order to gain leverage and to continue building a career in the manner Piero suggests (cf. Faulkner 1983), and very subtle tactics of decorum are necessary here, too.

Consequently, even as agents are undeniably “reflexive” implementers of culturally specific strategies (cf. Goffman 1974, p. 12; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Bourdie 1990), culture must provide means for agents to get past this reflexivity to see each other’s identity or deeper selfhood. How is the impression of a deeper self—the public construction of a private

1 In fact, what we “really” value may be as much a product of what we achieve through interaction as something given prior to interaction. Thus, our interests become real for ourselves in a similar manner as they become real for others.
self—achieved? Utilizing Goffman’s notion of frame analysis, I argue that this construction of self, which is so integral to achieving relationships, arises from the assembly of cultural cues and forms and from a publicly made ranking of relevant roles or motivations, provided in social interaction. These constructions are also embedded in and refer to narratives of where these selves and their relationships have come from and where they are going (Linde 1987; Gergen and Gergen 1988; Steinmetz 1992).

In this article, I use both quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyze the presentation of self and the construction of careers in Renaissance Florence. A database of several hundred private letters through which Florentines sought favors from each other provides the raw material for this analysis. By demonstrating the relevance of framing and narrative to the embeddedness of actors in networks, I aim to articulate theoretically how the study of cultural practices must be integrated into a network-analytic approach to social reality (cf. Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Network ties, far from being autochthonous, are typically constructed through cultural agency: “stories are the essential vehicle for elaborating networks” (White 1992, p. 67). And among these forms of agency is the strategic, selective representation of the agent’s network embeddedness in the course of interaction. This article aims to take us a step behind the macroanalysis of network structures (cf. Padgett and Ansell 1993) to examine the undertheorized efforts of individuals to occupy vacancies or capitalize on “structural hole”–like opportunities in the social structures to which they are connected (see Burt 1992). Examining this cultural work is necessary because it is the means by which social ties are created and maintained and individual mobility is enhanced. It is also the forum in which the nature of the obligations that these ties exert is determined.

More specifically, I offer a number of important cautions to practitioners of network analysis, deriving from both macro and micro concerns. First, different sorts of relationships will be shown to be constructed, at an aggregate level, employing different constructions of motive. This places in some doubt the simple stackability of different types of ties, for different ties may involve rather inconsistent presentations of self, potentially to the same alter. Saying this, however, it is also

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3 It can also come through violating rules of decorum. Thereby, the recipients of cultural signals locate identity precisely where the veneer of etiquette is punctured and infer the nature of the author behind that construction (Goffman 1974, chap. 8; Foucault 1975). This is as true for the Piero-like strategist who boldly states his case, self-interested motives as for the Advocate-like seeker of spiritual relationships. Rule-breaking behavior helps define the boundary between acceptable behavior and violations and thus sustains the boundary as a common point of contention (cf. Laitin and Wildavsky 1988).
clear that actors frequently try to bootstrap new relationships to already achieved ones whenever possible. Positions (whether achieved or still sought after) in different networks will have determinate impact on each other, mediated to a considerable extent by the narration of their connection (or disconnectedness) on the part of actors. Second, it will be shown that specific types of ties to particular alters—say a relationship of gaining an office through the graces of a particular patron—have very different meanings to different actors and are constructed through rather different cultural frames and symbols. Such a fact means we lump all such office-holding relationships into a single social network matrix at some peril to our understanding of reality. Third, it will be documented how even within a particular relationship, the precise substantive significance of the tie and its strength over time is subject to considerable variability. Just where actors are in their careers, for example, needs to be addressed to better estimate the meaning of a particular tie and its consequences. Further, in the course of constructing ties, actors implicitly negotiate the strength and exclusivity of that tie. Simply reading interpersonal loyalties off of network patterns ignores this negotiation to the detriment of understanding network dynamics. In short, network analysis must attend much more to how actors get into (and out of) relationships and to how those relationships are managed by cultural means. Failing this, the intensity, durability, flexibility, heterogeneity, and additivity of different social networks cannot be well understood.

FRAME ANALYSIS AND THE STUDY OF CULTURE

Although much attention has been devoted recently to matters of culture in sociology, we still need a conceptual framework and a set of methods for empirical research that show how culture “works” (Schudson 1989) by productively integrating the understanding of culture as a set of flexible rule-based practices (Cicourel 1973; Swidler 1986) and as a web of meanings in which agents obtain socially recognized identities for themselves (Geertz 1973). Strategic action and the construction of interests (the establishment of identities) both arise on the basis of the practical cultural tools or building blocks out of which social interaction is constructed. Several desiderata ideally should be satisfied by a good technique for studying culture: identifying common practices and their canonization in the form of etiquette, rules of decorum, and so on; tracing out empirically and theoretically why certain cultural practices are more robust than others; identifying departures from empirically common patterns and their implications; identifying what kinds of combinations of cultural practices seem most common or most persuasive; and locating linkages, interpenetra-
tions, and correspondences between the complex patterns of cultural structure and social structure.

I use the notion of frame and associated analytical concepts (Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986; Sarat and Felstiner 1988; Tannen 1993; Gumperz 1992) to tackle some of these requirements. The notion of framing is useful because it spans instrumentalist and interpretivist connotations of culture, implying both negotiated meaning and the strategic erection of resemblances and exemplars relevant to constructing a particular context for action. Frames organize experience, but not in a simple unidirectional path between stipulated actions, nor in terms of simple binary oppositions (cf. Alexander and Smith 1993). Rather, culture is better understood as a multidimensional cognitive space in which a variety of frames are deployable. Then we can analyze “strips of activity” (in this case, Renaissance patronage letters) for keywords, images, and phrases that concretely construct, suggest, or evoke which frame of meaning is in effect at a given time. Of course, one needs to spell out which frames and cues are available to understand the cultural terrain upon which given instances of agency take place. Further, we will want to see how different frames can be juxtaposed since the strategic lamination of vocabularies of motive on top of each other can create an impression that certain motives are purer, deeper, more “real” (Goffman 1974, p. 2), or more representative of private interests and goals than are others.

This cultural agency in terms of framing typically involves particular techniques that are amenable to analysis. For example, we may look for how writers focus reader attention on certain events, characters, or perspectives. We can look for amplification of themes or frames through repeated keyword use (Snow et al. 1986), for strategies of politeness that help maintain face (Brown and Levinson 1987), and for ways of communicating an expectation of assistance. We can look for the inclusive and exclusive, boundary- or frame-creating use of pronouns as deictic expressions (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990) and for contextualization cues that communicate the proper context for understanding a message through the text of the message itself (Duranti and Goodwin 1992, p. 18; Gumperz 1992; Hanks 1992). In short, we should analyze strips of activity for the way they conjure background meanings and play with their location.

Naturally, culture and structure, however analytically separable they are, will be interpenetrating, because individuals and institutions are positioned in both, cultural classifications are typically integral in defining spaces in social structure, and placement in different social spaces brings one into contact with different streams of agents and cultural practices. This viewpoint has been succinctly stated by Sewell (1982, p. 27; cf. Archer 1988).
vis-à-vis those background meanings as a means of situating the self of
the agent in relation to the self of the alter and to the social identities
of competitors for scarce goods.

THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CULTURE:
FLORENTINE PATRONAGE LETTERS AS A CORPUS OF
PATTERNED DISCOURSE

Renaissance Florentines sought each other out constantly, through face-
to-face interaction or through letters, to obtain favors such as favorable
tax treatment; offices for themselves, friends, relatives, or clients; writs of
safe-conduct; and securing support in various disputes. As the volume of
offices available increased with the conquest of the contado over the
course of the later 14th century (Becker 1968), the volume of correspon-
dence grew; and as the burden of taxation grew with the prosecution of
wars in the early 15th century (Molho 1971), and as a smaller and smaller
subset of the elite came to control appointments through patronage (Na-
jem 1982; Brucker 1977), seeking favor—or recognition of one’s worthi-
ness (Griffiths et al. 1987)—became a very urgent matter in a highly com-
npetitive environment. Letters, both private and official (and sometimes
both simultaneously), were the lifeblood of the commune (Kent 1991; Na-
jem 1993). Examined in the aggregate, we find in them many regularities
of expression, practical cultural building blocks canonized into a set of
rhetorical tropes and cue words that signal frames of meaning by which
individuals constructed and prosecuted their preferences in imitation of
established practices (White 1978; Holland and Skinner 1987, p. 87). Thus,
for simple expository purposes, we can treat the frequency and ubiquity
of particular words and turns of phrase as measurable “cultural objects”
(Griswold 1987).

Measuring the use of these objects across cases allows us to trace which
cues and framing devices are most used, the purposes to which they are
put, and whether they are used in conjunction with or in contrast to other
ones. Thus, the ensemble or structure of frames that comprise quattro-
cento Florentine practical culture is empirically determined; conversely,
assessing individual letters by means of which elements of the cultural
“toolkit” they utilize places writers of letters in particular parts of the cul-
tural space. Some of these building blocks were discussed in letter-writing
manuals, and writing letters was considered a core element of the average
Florentine merchant’s son’s curriculum (Grendler 1989; Weissman 1989;
Morelli in Branca 1986). Once this terrain is mapped using frequency cal-
culations and multidimensional scaling, a subsequent section will use
some of the discourse analytic tools developed in the tradition of Goff-
man’s work on frames to examine how particular agents assemble, key,
break, and laminate different frames of meaning, thus differentially appropriating these cultural objects as they erect public constructions of their private selves. The quantitative and qualitative elements of the analysis are essential for each other: we cannot know what instances of cultural practice are exceptional without a general overview of those practices, nor can we understand enough about agency and the practice of framing without examining particular letters for techniques of construction and self-presentation.

The database for this analysis comprises 869 letters, composed between roughly 1380 and 1460, by means of which Renaissance Florentines sought favor and friendship from influential patrons. The data is used in conjunction with a wealth of information about individual writers and receivers of patronage letters. Several thousand letters were read and considered for coding. The final sample is not fully representative, nor could it be, given that extant letters are preponderantly addressed to members of a few powerful families: the Medici, the Strozzi, the Sacchetti. Letters between family members are underrepresented since career-building dynamics tend to be much less observable there. Letters had to be legible—not a negligible consideration with this data, as Florentine scholars will attest. Finally, letters of modest length (typically no more than one full page) were targeted, with an eye toward selecting a subset of letters that would include (1) letters between both political allies and political enemies, (2) letters from social elites as well as from those of modest background, and (3) both isolated letters (the most common case) and, when possible, series of letters from the same writer. Consideration of the letters written between roughly 1421 and 1436 was quite comprehensive, and representation of these letters is quite high. This period was focal because information about the wealth, residence, and network embeddedness of individuals was richest for this period, in the aftermath of the 1427 catasta (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985). The sampling is more precarious for later years, and further archival research is planned to redress this problem.

Some of these letters have been used by other researchers, most notably in Dale Kent’s (1978) impressive work on the rise of the Medici in the 1420s, but they have not been subjected to the kind of quantitative analysis performed here, nor have they been discussed so extensively in terms of the discourse analytic tools used here. My particular focus is on how people do politics through writing. Where I summon the facts, I employ them instrumentally to understand the way in which discourse is embedded in, modified by, and constitutive of the structure of social relations and the stream of events.

Letters were assigned a primary content and were coded for the occurrence of keywords and phrases, approximately 50 in number, chosen for
how important they appeared to be in the background cognitive map of Florentine culture. The average occurrence of various keywords in different types of letters is reported in table 1.

These keywords are of two sorts. (1) Some act chiefly as substantive cues that suggest a framework of meaning in which the letter-as-encounter is taking place—Am I framing my competence or my relationship to you as based on my sense of honor (onore), on personal friendship (amicizia) or loyalty, on filial affection, on justifiable need (bisogno), on your generosity (magnificenza), on virtue or objective worth, or on the dictates of communal service? Which of these framings gets used subly changes the cast of the relationship being constructed. (2) Some provide skeletal semantic forms upon which and through which a writer’s personal case is presented in a recognizable and sanctioned format. These are turns of phrase that customarily accompany and rhetorically signal the introduction or reinforcement of a request: “In service to them, work things out as seems best to you with the Signoria that they obtain their wish, which is quite justified” (in loro servigio adoperare quello vi pare colia S. che obtengano la domanda che è assai giusta; MAP XII, 161); “Tell me what you wish and I will do it willingly” (se io posso fare qualcosa per voi m’avisate e farolto volerteri; MAP XI, 456); “I am certain you cannot fail me” (certo io ho fermissima speranza che non mi possa mancare; MAP XI, 432); and the ubiquitous “I beg of you as much as I know how and am able to” (priesgovi quanto so e posso; C.S. III, 130:192). Words and phrases of this sort anticipate and animate the making of a request. What we might consider rhetorical inflation is in fact commonplace here, a fact that cannot be documented well without an extensive quantitative review of keywords.

In addition, each letter was coded where possible for the age, income, and neighborhood of sender and recipient, plus the date of the first priorate (a measure of political prestige) and embeddedness in economic and marital networks of the senders’ and recipients’ families. For each case, a set of variables was calculated measuring the differences between sender and recipient in age, income, and political prestige, and the proximity of

5 Choice of keywords was guided specifically by the author’s reading of numerous Renaissance treatises, ricordanze, public documents, and the like, and based on a sense, in the course of reading thousands of letters, of which sorts of syntactical devices and substantive framings recur in a salient fashion.

6 Some of these turns of phrase have clear resonance with formulas used in the dictatorial tradition of letter writing in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. A whole literature exists on this subject, but for an introduction to it, see Murphy (1974), Kristeller (1963), Witt (1988), and McLean (1996, chap. 2). The primary sources (letters) used here are from the Archivio di Stato, Firenze, and include pieces from the Carte del Bene, Carte Strozziiane, III’e serie (hereafter C.S. III), Conventi Soppressi, 78 (Conv. Soppr.), and Mediceo Avanti il Principato (MAP) collections.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Honor</th>
<th>Diligence</th>
<th>Virtue</th>
<th>Magnificence</th>
<th>Ambition</th>
<th>Kinship</th>
<th>Adopterere</th>
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**Note.**—Each cell is calculated by the total number of incidents of that keyword divided by total number of letters of that type. Only data on the 10 most frequently found types of letters plus “flattery” and “difference” letters are reported here. Letters from these 12 categories contain 643 of the total number of letters collected (850).
their residence, since the text and framing of letters has more to do with the relative positioning of sender and recipient than with their absolute traits. The network variables are inherently relational. I use these variables later to assess the extent to which cultural practice is shaped by social structural positioning of different sorts.

The "assurance" letters in table 1 are those in which the writer primarily assures the recipient of his loyalty. Letters about difference pertain to matters of dispute between the writer and someone else and often request some adjudication or mediation from the recipient. Much of the extant correspondence consists of simple informational letters and letters in which military engagements or military supply problems are discussed. "Office" letters are those in which the writer seeks office, usually but not always for himself, while recommendations are those in which the author typically recommends a friend, relative, or acquaintance for a specific favor or general goodwill. Requests for unspecified favors, requests for assistance in recovering property, and requests for assistance in gaining release from prison, whatever the offense (felonies, bankruptcy, hostage taking, and military capture all figure here), are also common subjects. "Tax" letters are those in which cash-strapped individuals sought loans or influence from rich or powerful others to meet their fiscal obligations. "Thanks" letters are those in which gratitude is expressed for past favors done. For purposes of simplification, the balance of this article will focus most on the features of office-seeking letters.

Each cell in table 1 reports the average occurrence of a particular keyword in a particular type of letter and can be compared to the average incidence of the given keyword across all letters printed on the "totals" line. By extension, reading across the rows gives a sense of the available keywords in the Florentine toolkit and their relative weighting for framing the average office letter or the average request for money letter, and so on. Few keywords appear once or close to once per letter, even when the data is segmented by type of request. No hardwired template existed that absolutely required certain kinds of requests to be framed in determinate ways.

Specifically, table 1 tells us that the notion of honor appears approximately two-and-a-half times as often in office letters as the average across all types and cases and is also used with frequency in letters flattering to the recipient and those expressing personal loyalty or attachment (assur-

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1 Separate chi-square statistics were calculated for the presence/absence of each of the variables reported in this table by letter type. All were found to be significant at a $P < .05$ level except *virtual* and "certainty." Letter salutations invoking honor ("Honorable sir") or brotherhood ("Carissimo fratello"), the most formulaic of openings, are not significantly linked to particular types of letter.
Frame Analysis

ance). Building relationships with an eye to these ends strongly leads toward the framing of oneself or one’s alter as being concerned with honor. The concept of honor was, and is, a fluid concept whose meaning changes situationally and over time (Pitt-Rivers 1977; Bourdieu 1977). In 13th-century Florence, honor was most attached perhaps to the notions of family solidarity and vendetta (Lansing 1991), a sense it sometimes retained into the 1400s. For various late 14th-century Florentine authors such as Lapo da Castiglionchio and Coluccio Salutati, honor meant typically a certain self-confident disposition and a particular lifestyle involving landed wealth and the pursuit of the highest, most adventurous mercantile vocations—in other words, the lifestyle of the post-Ciompi ruling elite. In the memoirs of ordinary merchants such as Paolo da Cer taldo (Branca 1986), honor meant primarily an unbesmirched reputation in business dealings. But with Leonardo Bruni, chancellor of Florence in the early 1400s and a key figure in the development of civic humanism (Baron 1966), honor became firmly wedded to taking a role in civic administration. The regularity with which office was cast in terms of bestowing honor upon its occupant fits well within the Brunian conceptual landscape. Beyond these different substantive implications of being honorable however, honor seems to involve such notions as being one’s own man, not running away from danger, and having a public reputation for integrity and for savvy, drawing upon each as the situation requires. In short, even as political matters emerged at the surface of how honor was pursued in the early 15th century, a variety of significances remained in the background. The resultant multivalency of the notion of honor had an important effect in making switching between frames of meaning more possible.

Table 1 also shows that petitions for office highlight the magnificence of the potential patron more than the average—the display of his power and generosity in bestowing a position, a code of action rather distinct from the more bourgeois and circumspect attitudes of Florence’s merchants and ruling elite in the early quattrocento. Where flattery is the main aim of the letter, honor and magnificence may both be legitimately emphasized. By contrast, when the supplicant finds himself in undeniably dire straits, such as in prison, the unconditional generosity and potency of the patron implied by the magnificence framing appear appropriate and efficacious, whereas discussions of honor are typically considered out of place.

Amicizia—a form of friendship in Renaissance Florence in which senti-

4 There is even a semantic connection between onore (honor) and onori (offices). Singular and plural versions of the term, however, were carefully coded separately, and most often the context dictates that the singular form of the word connotes honor, integrity, or public respect, rather than “office.”
American Journal of Sociology

ment and instrumentality were typically conflated (Trexler 1980; Silver 1989) and which often signified the existence of favoritism, political connections, or partisanship—is another important frame for pursuing the achievement of office. Nepotism in the distribution of offices was widespread, and expectations of action based on nepotism are surprisingly baldly expressed in some letters and implicitly invoked in others where the recipient was requested to "work things out" (adoperare) on behalf of the supplicant. Amicizia is commonly used in letters of "assurance" and as the rhetorical grease lubricating letters of recommendation, the main venue for the activation of weak tie networks (Granovetter 1973).

Neither honor, nor magnificence, nor amicizia figures very strongly in letters where some kind of economic relief was sought, whether tax relief or assistance in the recovery of property. Instead, individuals making these requests stress qualities like diligence (diligenza), effort (fatica), and ingenuity (ingegno) in the patron. Patrons are framed here by favor seekers as being adept at cutting through red tape, but there is less signaling in these letters of interpersonal commitment, reciprocity, or relationship building—an intriguing difference between politically and economically oriented interactions not commonly attended to in the clientelism literature. Finally, note how infrequently reference is made to virtù. Though both Dante and Machiavelli discuss this notion extensively (albeit in diametrically different senses), it is largely avoided in the everyday discourse studied here, which should make us wary of jumping to conclusions about which elite concepts and values frame everyday interaction. Where virtù does figure in the discussion of office holding, one senses it plays a subordinate role to other considerations.⁹

Table 1 thus provides a sense of how different sorts of request on average generate different sorts of framings of self and other. When we turn to individual letters, we may then come equipped with better grounded expectations concerning the kinds of terms the Florentines typically employed for seeking advantage and constructing their relationships.

What table 1 cannot do, however, is tell us if there is an "average" practice of actually framing a request that employs a composite of keywords that refer to and laminate together a variety of analytically separable frames of meaning, or if the "averages" are misleading aggregations across subsets of letters that actually employ mutually exclusive frames.

⁹ See, e.g., Cresci di Lorenzo de' Cresci's letter to Cosima de' Medici, December 17, 1439 (MAP XI, 336), in which he wryly remarks concerning the decision of a certain group of officials to appoint Medici amico Antonio Martelli to a position in lieu of a different candidate, that "they came to this [choice] willingly on account of his virtù, and the contemplation of you" (a questo sono venuti volentieri per la virtù sua e per la contemplazione di te).
A better technique for getting at this question and for representing the rhetorical space in which letters get constructed is multidimensional scaling (MDS). MDS generates a spatial image of the distance keywords (and therefore frames) are from each other, distance being a function of how the keywords are distributed across the cases of letters. Cooccurring keywords are placed close together; keywords used in largely different subsets of letters are placed far apart.

Figure 1 plots selected keywords used specifically in office-seeking letters and highlights how honor, amicitia, expressions of objective need (bisogno), patronal magnificence, and clientelistic service constitute differentially employed frames for construing the significance of an office-based relationship between sender and recipient. Among the less frequently used keywords in the center of the plot, expressions of obligation (obrigato) and faith or trust (fede) are placed closest to expressions of service, while considerations of advantage (utilità) tend to appear more with requests set up in terms of the instrumentally and transactionally inclined framework of amicitia. Florentines saw different framings of relationships with others as conceptually distinct and as having distinct implications.

Framing oneself in terms of the pursuit of honor was to highlight one's autonomy, concern for values, and equal membership in an elite that shared a sense of the importance of office holding and obligation to the city. "Honor" meant one was willing and worthy to hold office on the basis of one's own character and abilities, not on the basis of one's loyalties. By contrast, stressing the magnificence of one's alter effectively reduces one's own claim to honor. The language used in this framing of self is highly deferential; the worthiness of the self disappears in the foregrounding of the power and glory of the alter. Letters adopting this framework make considerable use of pregare (to beg), the primary deferential verb of petitioning. Here too, we tend to find greater use of the notion of need (bisogno) as a justification for assistance: the man of honor craves a position; he does not, strictly speaking, "need" it. Further, need may be a justification for assistance independent of the interpersonal responsibilities of clients and patrons or fathers and sons and thus stands in contrast to the framing of oneself as a "servant."

The amicitia frame implicitly treats self and other as more or less equal—at least equally committed to a partisan project—and often engaged in an exchange of favors. In this aspect, it resembles the (contentiously) egalitarian quality of the honor framework. But it is distinguished from writing in terms of honor precisely in replacing objective considerations of merit with subjective considerations of loyalty. The tension involved in identifying oneself and alter as members of the same class or ruling elite through the use of the frame of honor, in order to obtain a desired end, despite the fact that self and alter are allied with different
FIG. 1.—MDS plot of selected keywords used in office letters
parties or groups of *amici*, is precisely what produces the complexity of the correspondence between Ormanno degli Albizzi and Averardo de' Medici discussed at some length below.

Finally, the service or clientelistic framing tends to be deferential, like the framing of alter in terms of magnificence. But like the *amicizia* framework, it tries to draw a boundary of partisanship inclusively around self and other. In highlighting favors owed to one's followers, the "service" framing aims to constitute the relationship between self and alter as a hierarchical but affective relationship. Overall, then, these different frames calibrate the social distance between sender and receiver in different ways and ground the terms of their relationship and their joint treatment of others in substantially different ways. Hence, in figure 1, the horizontal axis measures differences in the representation of social status, while the vertical axis measures differences in the representation of degree of relationship. These culturally informed representations of social proximity and distance are integral to the construction of relationships.

Figure 2 maps these competing framings onto the sample of office-seeking letters to guide us toward understanding how actual letters work within this cultural terrain. Honor is the predominant (though not exclusive) frame for letters on the left side of the figure, while patronal magnificence figures strongly in letters on the right. Letters toward the top of figure 2 try to reinforce the relationship between writer and recipient in affective hierarchical terms (as, e.g., in case 65 [MAP III, 13], where Carlo Bilotti concludes by referring to himself as "vostro servidore fidellissimo"). Those toward the bottom build the request for office chiefly on the basis of *amicizia*, or favors owed between friends. This mapping is crude, but overall, the MDS plot of keyword use offers useful suggestions about different constructions and tones of self-presentation.

The question obviously arises about why each of these different available framings would get chosen by particular writers. The answer is, to a noteworthy extent, rooted in writers' placement in social structure—both status hierarchies and relational networks, as demonstrated in table 2. This table reports on the linkage between variation in language usage across cases and background social structural factors such as the relative age, wealth, and political prestige of letter recipients and senders, as well as the degree of their connectedness through marital and economic networks and the degree of neighborhood separation between them. The upper half of the table indicates that the difference between recipients and senders of letters found in the core of the MDS plot in figure 2, in terms of wealth and political capital and distance between their neighborhoods of residence, is smaller on average than it is for cases in the periphery. Senders here are also more likely to be from the same family as recipients, more likely to be linked to the family of letter recipients through direct
FIG. 2.—MDS plot of letters seeking office
TABLE 2
RELATIVE STATUS OF RECIPIENTS AND SENDERS OF OFFICE LETTERS AS PLOTTED IN FIGURE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age difference (in years)</td>
<td>4.71 (17)</td>
<td>4.19 (26)</td>
<td>-3.50 (2)</td>
<td>5.20 (10)</td>
<td>14.29 (7)</td>
<td>-5.14 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth difference*</td>
<td>3.06 (21)</td>
<td>1.04 (28)</td>
<td>1.67 (3)</td>
<td>1.11 (9)</td>
<td>-.14 (7)</td>
<td>1.67 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political prestige difference†</td>
<td>.67 (27)</td>
<td>1.00 (35)</td>
<td>1.50 (6)</td>
<td>1.36 (12)</td>
<td>.38 (8)</td>
<td>.82 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity of residence‡</td>
<td>2.50 (30)</td>
<td>2.81 (44)</td>
<td>2.89 (9)</td>
<td>2.62 (13)</td>
<td>2.30 (10)</td>
<td>2.67 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path distance in marriage network§</td>
<td>2.52 (31)</td>
<td>3.32 (47)</td>
<td>5.20 (10)</td>
<td>2.77 (13)</td>
<td>3.09 (11)</td>
<td>2.62 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of direct marriages¶</td>
<td>1.54 (28)</td>
<td>.71 (38)</td>
<td>.50 (6)</td>
<td>.73 (11)</td>
<td>.67 (3)</td>
<td>.83 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of letters within family</td>
<td>.26 (31)</td>
<td>.09 (47)</td>
<td>.00 (10)</td>
<td>.08 (13)</td>
<td>.09 (11)</td>
<td>.15 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross economic relatedness¶</td>
<td>1.47 (19)</td>
<td>1.90 (31)</td>
<td>1.60 (5)</td>
<td>1.90 (10)</td>
<td>2.43 (7)</td>
<td>1.67 (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—Nos. in parentheses are valid n for the relevant variable.
*"Wealth difference score" represents approximately an exponent of 10, 10^x being the factor by which recipient's income in 1427 outstrips that of sender.
†"Political prestige score" was customarily measured in terms of the year one's patrilineage first placed a member in the city's priorate. Larger numbers indicate a greater degree to which any member of recipient's family preceded any member of sender's family into the ranks of the city's most esteemed administrative body.
‡The residential relationship between recipient and sender was coded "1" if they lived in the same fautorfamula of the city, "2" if in different fautorfamula within the same quarter, and "3" if they lived in different quarters. Thus smaller numbers indicate greater proximity.
§Marriage network relatedness indicates average path distance between sender and recipient families within sectors using Padgett's (1994) marriage network data. Thus smaller numbers signify greater proximity in the Florentine marriage market.
¶Direct marriage ties equals number of times recipient's and sender's families intermarried in the 30 years prior to and one year after the date of the letter. Thus larger numbers indicate more underlying relationship between sender and recipient.
*Gross economic relatedness is a recalibrated sum of all economic ties between sender's and recipient's families as reported in the 1427 catasto.
marriage ties, and to be more proximate in the Florentine marriage market. Thus, cultural innovation and emphasis on meaningful tropes appear to be generated more by social outsiders than by those at the core (cf. Hunt 1984), precisely because they need their letters to communicate what their social position in itself cannot.

The second half of the table divides the periphery into sectors. Given the mapping presented in figure 1, we should expect the letters in the “honor” sector to be written by supplicants of an age, income, and political prestige comparable to their alters, while the numbers for the magnificenza sector should be higher. In fact they are, except for age.10 Those using honor should be closer in the marriage market to their alters than those using the magnificenza framing, and this too appears, on average, to be the case. Comparing the service-oriented and amicitia-oriented sectors, we predictably find age differences and political prestige differences between recipient and sender to be greater in the former. Since amicitia in one of its primary senses is based on weak ties (Granovetter 1973), sender’s and recipient’s neighborhoods might well be farther apart for cases here than in other sectors; so, on average, they are. Marriage connections between the sender’s and the recipient’s families are clearly least likely for those who resort to deferential framing in terms of magnificenza. The greatest amount of economic connectedness between families holds for the sector in which status parity seems strongest, and is next strongest in the service sector, the strong tie/status difference sector, again as we might expect.

In the final analysis, considering the small sample size for the various sectors, these trends should be considered suggestive rather than conclusive. A more important caveat is in order, however, for predicting how letters are framed on the basis of the placement of actors in underlying social structures remains a risky business. There are a number of cases in which fairly low-status writers write in intimate terms to high-status recipients.11 This intimacy across social distance is endemic to the nature

10 Age is an odd case here. Many of the letters in the honor sector were written by Ormanno degli Albizzi to Averardo de’ Medici. The two came from families of comparable prestige, but Averardo was old enough to be Ormanno’s father. I discuss the details of this correspondence extensively below.

11 Cases 15, 57, and 59 in the core sector of fig. 2 and cases 13 and 57 in the amicitia sector are cases of this sort. In case 13 (MAP II, 201), the artisan Michelozzo di Bartolomeo Michelozzi writes confidently to Averardo de’ Medici: “Many times I discussed with you whether it might happen that you could give some position to Giovanni my brother, were the occasion to arise, and now I believe you will have had one.” A certain Matteo appointed as sottoscrivano on a galley the commune was equipping would be unable to take up his post, as he was in the field, and this would afford Averardo perfect opportunity to provide Giovanni with a post. Michelozzo continues:
of clientelism, as discussed by Eisenstadt and Roniger (1980, 1984) and others. The difficulty always lies in assessing where individuals lie at the present moment on their path toward achieving intimacy despite their apparent structural position based on static indicators, for the very point of the form of communication studied here is the dynamic construction and improvement of relationships.\footnote{In fact, a logistic regression procedure that aimed to predict whether or not letters would use formal language based on status and relational attributes misclassified a number of precisely those cases where low-status Medici henchmen write in intimate terms to their patrons. This difficulty precisely demarcates the treacherous waters where a Bourdieuian approach that treats social structure and cultural practice as homologous founders (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Low-status yet intimate correspondents could well display both valences of their identity in the text and tone of their letters, something to look for in the qualitative analysis of interaction.}

**THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CULTURE: PATRONAGE LETTERS AS EXERCISES IN FRAMING**

In what follows, a variety of examples of different sorts of framing of motive and castings of relationships are presented, proceeding toward more complicated forms of laminating together different frames of meaning to produce textured public presentations of self. Throughout this section, I want to draw attention to the way individual writers use the substantive frames I have described so far, but also to how they construct their letters to achieve a portrait of themselves and their motivations by amplifying certain themes through repeated keyword use, communicating their confidence in being well served, gauging the limits of their politeness, linking their interests rhetorically to those of their would-be patrons, ranking their preferences, and providing the context for their requests in the course of their writing. These techniques for self-presentation and “networking” appear modern, even if they are harnessed to building relationships in substantive terms rather different from those we might seek.

Arguably, the simplest way to request assistance in obtaining office is to ask for it bluntly, as in a letter of Francesco di Niccolo Baldovinetti to Forese Sacchetti written October 12, 1409 (Conv. Soppr. 78, 324:172; case 61 in the core of fig. 2):

In this regard [Francesco had just indicated when his present occupation would conclude], I pray of you as much as I can, that if you were to see yourself able to provide me with some office or other commission, either keeping track of your soldiers or inspection or some similar thing, I pray you advise me of it, for it would be singularly pleasing to me. . . . And I pray

\footnote{I have it on authority from Ser Martino [another Medici partisan] that these matters rest in your hands, and thus I recommend this to you.}
that you keep me in mind in whatever you might see that would increase my honor."

This letter, written using the informal "tu," gives one the sense that the two men were already well acquainted with each other, so that hardly any framing of Baldovinetti’s character or situation needed to be provided in the letter, nor any rationale for Sacchetti to take action on Baldovinetti’s behalf. Of course, this in itself is a construction of the self-inrelation.

Sometimes this informality, however, takes the form of positive politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) and becomes an explicit part of the framing, as in another letter from the core of figure 2 (case 53), a letter from Marcello Strozzi to his kinsman Simone Strozzi (C.S. III, 131:12):

Speaking with such familiarity (dimesichessa) as we may together, I pray of you that you be the agent (operatore) whereby Gianozzo Cavalcanti, my brother-in-law, who has need of earning a little money, and also of having some office (onor), receive from you the office of inspector (rassegnante), so that this May he is sent out. I pray this of you considering it to be a singular pleasure of mine.

The opening clause here represents an effort by Marcello at reminding Simone of the intimacy they share and thus sets up and justifies the candor of the request that follows, as if to say: “I could not speak so frankly to someone whom I did not already consider my confidante.” Further, note how different rationales for granting this favor—parentado, need, honor—are rhetorically linked by Marcello as all conducing to Simone taking action on Cavalcanti’s behalf. The rhetorical representation of the multiplexity of common ties and motivations linking Marcello and Simone is intended by Marcello to deepen Simone’s sense of commitment to him.

But there also exist slightly more complicated versions of framing requests for office in terms of amicizia. First, we have a letter of May 14, 1431 from Bartolo Ridolfi to Averardo de’ Medici (MAP III, 126; case 22 in the amicizia sector of fig. 2) in which Bartolo writes on behalf of a certain Benedetto da San Miniato, “who is a person for whom I would always exert myself to do good, both because he merits it and I am obliged to him, and because he is a friend and relative of your, and my, dear friends.”

Because Benedetto had decided not to return home, he was now in

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12 “In questo mezzo ti priego quanto posso se vedessi potermi fare alcuna onore o alcuna concessione o descrivere i vostri soldati o rassegnare o simile cosa ti priego ne sia avvisato riputandome io in singolare piacere . . . E priego mi abbia a mente in quello vedessi fusse di mio onore.” Note the two distinct senses of the word “onor” in this letter (cf. n. 8 above).
search of a new position, and Bartolo was urging Averardo to help get him a position with a different signore. He went on to write:

For this reason if there is any favor or pleasure whatsoever you can do for me, as much as I am able I pray of you that it please you to fix him up with Signore Michele as his chancellor. . . . He is an able person in this and everything, and if you will do it, as I know you can, you will be many, many times thanked by Signore Michele; and to me, especially, among whatever pleasures you may afford me, this is one of the greatest ones. I will not express myself further on this, because I know it is not necessary, and because things will be arranged in the way you want, and your will and mine are the same thing.

The boundaries of friendship and the confluence of interests are actively constructed in this letter: yes, Benedetto is an able person, but more important, he is a friend of the friends of both of us, and so a circle of amicizia is drawn around him and Averardo. Bartolo urges Averardo to consider the consequences of providing this assistance, "speaking for another" (Schiffrin 1993) by anticipating for Averardo the kind of gratitude he could expect to receive from Signore Michele, and from Bartolo himself. Bartolo quite explicitly ranks the awarding of this favor against others that he might have in the past requested, that he currently was soliciting, or that he hypothetically may request in the future. Consequently, this request is contextualized and prioritized in light of other potential requests, intimating where Bartolo's deepest preferences lie. Further, he gives an account of how Benedetto has chosen not to go home as it would be a waste of time, "and in truth he speaks the truth, for you know all the offices there are rotten and the country is in darkness." This short narration of the reality of the situation gives greater justification to Benedetto's plan and Bartolo's portrayal of his need. Finally, Bartolo actively communicates an expectation of being assisted by claiming an identity between his and Averardo's will and a confidence that Averardo can bring to pass whatever he wishes to have done.

Under certain circumstances, the request for favor on behalf of friends had to be hedged with rhetorical concern for honor. A letter of Palla di Nofri Strozzi to his kinsman Simone di Filippo Strozzi of August 11, 1421 (C.S. III, 132:50; case 56 in the honor sector of fig. 2) demonstrates such a texturing of motivations:

I wrote to you praying that you contrive, within the bounds that honor requires, that Galeotto di——— be elected to the constabulary of this place, telling you of his virtù and gentility, and also that he would be cognizant of his place as I understand it. And although I hear at the constabulary there is no place because the electors have deliberated, still the captain has not been provided. It would be dear to me if concerning this you might operate for my friend. May it not be bothersome to you to arrange the consent of Raffacane, who is one of the electors. And recommend him to him,
American Journal of Sociology

and contrive some action in this matter as much as you see possible, while retaining honor. He is a man of such virtù that I do not doubt that he would honor those who were to elect him, and who were to perform any favor for him.

Palla, scion of the largest and one of the most prestigious families in the city, offers this recommendation for his friend but does so in the context of honor: twice he emphasizes that pulling strings should be done within the demands of honor, and although Galeotto can be expected to be loyal to those who would help him, Palla tries to suggest this loyalty is a product of his sense of honor, as though returning favors were a matter of maintaining one's integrity and impeccable self-image rather than a matter of instrumental attachment to a group for the sake of individual advancement. This letter highlights the potential tension between acting with an eye to honor and acting with an eye to amicitia, and the expression salvando l'onore, which afforded the recipient the entitlement of saving face if he failed to satisfy a request, became a stock element in the way Florentines went about making requests and recommendations. Here the expression is particularly apt, for Palla is inviting Simone to intervene illegitimately in a political process that has already been decided. This letter therefore suggests that, even as kinship networks were an important instrument in the erection of political networks, the obligations that the latter networks entailed had considerable potential for straining or even rupturing kin relations.

The foregoing letters exemplify simple, emphatic, and then complex uses of the amicitia frame, the last being a case in which the friendship framing is complemented by or contrasted with other sorts of ties and motivations linking actors. These different manners of invoking amicitia, however, can be contrasted as a whole with examples in which supplicants portray themselves as servants of their patron. For instance, we have the letter of Francesco di Luigi Benintendi to Cosimo de' Medici of September 1, 1435 (MAP XII, 25; case 39 in the service sector of fig. 2):

My honorable elder, This letter only for the reason that I find myself in Pisa as you know, and I am searching for some occupation with which to sustain myself until the galleys leave, but still I have been able to find nothing—nor will I obtain anything without your help, such that I pray of you, as your faithful follower and servant, that in service to me you write a short note to the Marchese Malaspina, who is here as you know. . . . And further if you were to see another place in which to situate me with your letter, I pray of you, that wherever you put me, I will do you honor. Perhaps I use too many words, but the great faith I have in you moves me, such that I pray of you that I be recommended to you, as I am in a bad sort of state at present.

This letter, signed "your least servant," goes to considerable length to stress the dependence of the sender on Cosimo for help, as he claims im-
licitly to have no other source of assistance. But it also implicitly suggests that this assistance is warranted on the basis of a standing relationship: I have been “your faithful follower and servant.” Moreover, various cues are used to communicate simultaneously Cosimo’s power and Benintendi’s confidence in being helped. Rather than the letter communicating much in the way of news to Cosimo, Benintendi frames it as though Cosimo no doubt were already aware of his circumstances: as you know, I am in Pisa; as you know, the Marchese is here. These cues contextualize his request in terms of shared understandings with Cosimo. Rather than the strong framing betokening his desperation, Benintendi tries to suggest it is a function of his enthusiasm for Cosimo. As a result, Benintendi sets up his relationship to Cosimo as though assistance should flow automatically from the penning of the letter.

A letter of Francesco Nardi to “my” Averardo de’ Medici similarly builds on the assumption that patron and supplicant have an ongoing relationship, and perhaps more explicitly than Benintendi’s asserts the formative influence of the patron on the supplicant’s capacities and character. Nardi sought a renewal of his term of office as podestà of Città di Castello (MAP II, 292; case 15 in the core of fig. 2):

Honored singularly like a father, In the past few days, having confidence in your paternity as I know I can, I wrote to you, that it please you to be with Cosimo, and that he deign to write to Rome that I might have a reappointment to this office, and from you I have had no response, so that I think there will have been some bad delivery with the mail, such that with this letter again I pray of you, and beg, my Averardo, that you might wish to be the operatore by means of whom I get this reappointment, or some other office, so that I might return there. It would give me the heart to be a man like the others as you intend me to be.

Failure of patrons to respond was often attributed to problems with the mail, whereas Averardo was daily inundated with requests, sometimes for identical positions, and no doubt had to determine which requests would get priority. Lack of confidence in obtaining satisfaction, however, was rarely voiced by supplicants. The last sentence here is particularly striking, for it offers an implicit, almost contractual commitment of loyalty in return for a favor, and moreover, explicitly links the development of Nardi’s manhood—even his own self—to Averardo’s actions.¹⁴

¹⁴ A letter from Andrea di Pagolo della Scarperia to Averardo on April 5, 1430 (MAP II, 328) is very similar. Andrea writes: “Please contrive (adoperare) that I may stay here, and let me thus be able to say that you were the one who made me the man I would want to be. . . . As you are all my hope, I recommend myself to you; contrive what is needful that I be reappointed.” A diametrically different incentive for being granted a position is that provided by a certain Antonio on July 12, 1435 (C.S. III, 112:189) while looking for a position as a knight with Pazzino di Palla Strozzi, the new podestà of Rimini: “When I return to my office in Montemerlo, with your; and
American Journal of Sociology

Looking next to the magnificenza sector of Figure 2, we find a rather complicated letter from Luca Carducci to Giovanni di Cosimo de’ Medici of February 3, 1454 (MAP I, 252; case 4):

Thinking of how many times we have bothered you, requesting of you favors (servizi) for us and for our friends, through the mediation of Antonio degli Strozzi your brother-in-law and our honorable brother in love, it is not without trepidation I thought to write to your Magnificent Lordship to ask a new favor (gratia) and service, but provided it is an appropriate thing, noble and generous souls are in their magnanimity no less ready to grant what anyone were to demand. Considering the virtù and benevolence of your Lordship, I presume with great confidence to ask of your Lordship a favor, which is that Matteo Carducci my brother, at present podestà di Piccioli, by your virtù and efforts (operazione) be reappointed for one year or for six months, for the election has been postponed for one year, . . . Such that to your Lordship in this instant I recommend this matter, hoping that thus Matteo will carry himself to better things, and always we will remain obligated to your magnificent Lordship, whom may God in His grace always maintain and prosper.

Note here the repeated addressing of the recipient as “Lordship,” even though this is a letter between fellow Florentines. Thus it stresses, even more than the actual status difference between families would, the dependence of Luca on Giovanni for assistance.\textsuperscript{15} The heavy framing of Giovanni in terms of his nobility and magnificenza accomplishes the goal of appearing to be highly deferential—this in spite of the intimate connection the recipient and sender both have with the same individual, a contextual fact that Luca himself provides for us in the body of the letter. The aim here seems to be to remind Giovanni of a personalistic claim to assistance, without explicitly relying on this criterion. In fact, the personalism inherent in this request is actively portrayed as somewhat distasteful to Carducci, so that the reasonableness of the request, or the reading of it as an opportunity for the exercise of magnanimous generosity, takes center stage.

Finally, a more explicit distinction between motivations occurs in a letter of May 22, 1434, from the notary, Iacopo di Antonio di Salvestro, to Matteo di Simone Strozzi (C.S. III, 112:175; case 48 in the core of fig. 2):

Honored like a father, I heard that Messer Piero your relative was elected captain of Cortona, such that I beg of you that, if he is not so furnished,
you speak to him about me being his notary. And if he wants information about my affairs, I went with Antonio di Tedice degli Albizzi to Pisa when he was podestà, and with Buonaccorso Pitti to Prato. I am not concerned with the salary so much as with acquiring friends. I say no more for the moment. May Christ always watch over you. And if I can do anything in Pistoia, I am ready to do whatever be pleasing to you.

In some respects, the writer here simply reproduces customary practices to present his request. For example, the letter uses a customary “vi prego” formula; the salutation partakes of both honor and fatherhood frames common in office letters; and it ends with a formulaic expression of generalized reciprocity that is typical in favor-seeking letters. The mention of friends suggests in a fairly standardized way Iacopo’s desire for reliable connections with an eye toward advancement and, ultimately, his desire for relationships.

However, we have moved beyond the Middle Ages world where standardized gestures or other objective correlates are adequately communicative of internal dispositions (cf. Hood 1990). How do we read through this letter to the person? How is the person’s motivation constructed in the letter? The various writing strategies we have observed so far—contextualization cues, speaking for others, emphasis, cajolery and assurances, circumlocutions, ranking of preferences, and so on—are all designed for constructing a believable representation of the person.

Two main techniques can be observed in this letter. First, note how this claim for friends is framed: “I am not concerned with the salary so much as with acquiring friends.” This is an answer to an unposed question: Which is more relevant to understanding Iacopo’s motives in obtaining this appointment, friendship or money? Iacopo’s writing contextualizes his request for favor reflexively through the very text by means of which that request is made, assertively establishing the relevant frame for understanding his request. In this publicly constructed image of his private motivation, Iacopo claims his role in amicitia corresponds to his true self, his ‘real’ motives: “I am willing to trade off salary for friends.” And in Florence’s politically charged climate, to invoke amicitia—especially in regard to administrative office—was to evince a willingness to enter a world of personal loyalty and political dedication.

The second device pertains to the representation of social networks discursively. Actors are positioned in networks, in status groups, and in relationships. Yet in discourse, relevant past relationships can be highlighted, and problematic ones can be cast in shadow. As a notary, Iacopo was probably not wealthy, although he might have had opportunity to fraternize with powerful men, as notaries were a vital source of labor and knowledge for the commune. Lacking a surname, he lacked a significant
marker of social prestige. Hence, he invokes his connection to two prominent Florentine families. Like the Strozzi, the Albizzi were strongly associated with the oligarchic faction in the city. Mentioning the Pitti seems harder to fathom: Buonaccorso Pitti's son Luca was a Medici partisan in 1434. Yet the Pitti, in fact, tended to build very similar portfolios of marriage alliances as the Albizzi and Strozzi during the first 35 years of the 15th century (Padgett 1994). Whether this similarity was translated into a public understanding of their shared placement in social space cannot be known with certainty, but Iacopo's reference to these particular families suggests it might have been. So Iacopo says here, in effect, "These are the kinds of relationships I have sought and found in the past." The point is that self-presentation through patronage letters attempts to establish worthiness discursively while constructing a context of relationships—again discursively—with relevant others by which one's own worthiness or social capital can be inferred and tested. Words get manipulated to present a textured public picture of one's "private" motivations and reliability, and this framing is integral to the achievement of network positions.

FRAMING ACROSS LETTERS: THE DYNAMIC CONSTRUCTION OF RELATIONSHIPS

As the project of self-presentation is inherently designed to change one's structural position for the better, one would like to trace the ways in which this change could be accomplished across a series of letters, rather than simply asserted in one. We can do this for the case of Ormanno di Rinaldo degli Albizzi, son of one of the commune's most prominent politicians, who wrote a series of letters in early 1430 to Averardo de' Medici requesting assistance in securing an office in the naval service of the commune, in particular focusing on the arms he would be allowed to command in the war effort against Lucca. At this time, Averardo was consolo del mare in Pisa, a position with considerable influence over such appointments. Ormanno's difficulty was that while he was equal (if not superior) in social status to Averardo, the two found themselves on opposite sides of the factional battles shaping up in the city. Consequently, Ormanno had to begin by making a claim of being served with an office on the basis of honor, not on the basis of amicizia. Any claim he might eventually make concerning amicizia would have to be actively contextualized.16

16 Unfortunately, the current data set of office letters does not contain a group of letters from one supplicant to one patron in which we can witness the gradual construction of an intimate but hierarchical relationship, to contrast with the relationship Ormanno constructs with Averardo. The best we can do is a pair of letters from Francesco Arrighi to Averardo of February 4 and February 11, 1430 (MAP II, 175 and 202;
Six of the 10 extant letters Ormanno sent to Averardo were transcribed and are included in figure 2: MAP II, 148, 152, 168, 180, 225, and 226, in chronological order (cases 5, 74, 6, 75, 77, and 78, respectively). Note that the first four of these appear in the “honor” sector, while the fifth appears in the amicizia sector, and the last is situated very near the origin. Ormanno’s framing shifts during this stream of letters in a way that dynamically constructs his motivations. Custom dictated framing himself as a status inferior, but as we shall see, the rhetoric of the letter often suggests status parity between himself and Averardo. Meanwhile, the intimacy of talk in the letters contrasts oddly with Ormanno’s unwillingness to commit himself personally to Averardo and his friends. In a sense, then, all four of the cardinal poles of the rhetoric of office seeking identified in figure 1—status parity versus status difference, and strong ties versus weak ties—are activated in this complex correspondence.

Two basic issues arise: (1) How does Ormanno go about framing an image of himself through the narrative, imagery, and cuing in these letters? (2) Why is the ultimate image he constructs a credible one? As to the first of these, the presentation of Ormanno’s “true” self follows this basic trajectory: (1) I, Ormanno, assert that I am basically unconcerned with money (salary); (2) more important, I openly disparage the crass politics of amicizia, that is, favoritism; I eschew it as a base motivation; (3) I repeatedly adopt the implied high ground of concern for personal and communal honor; but then (4) I rekey (Goffman 1974, chap. 3) my ostentatious rhetoric as mostly playacting and quietly and “self-revealingly” adopt the language and tone of amicizia—which I had disparaged—as an acceptable portrait of my motivation, my interests, and my understanding of the way things work. Again, we could not know how extraordinary Ormanno’s writing is in the absence of the quantitative analysis of the corpus of letters identified in figure 2, yet we could also not fully understand Ormanno’s self-presentation and the nature of its change across letters without observing his rhetorical strategies closely, using concepts borrowed from discourse analysis.

Unfortunately, these letters are too long and involved to be reproduced in full here. Some aspects of them are standard. For example, Ormanno repeatedly expresses certainty that he will obtain Averardo’s assistance,

cases 8 and 14 in the honor and service sectors respectively of fig. 2), which are virtually identical in wording concerning a promotion to a new position in Averardo’s bank with Andrea de’ Bardi, except that Arrighi refers to himself in the conclusion of the second letter as Averardo’s servant—as if this subtle framing shift might lend his request more urgency.

Interested readers may consult full transcriptions and translations of these and other office-seeking letters elsewhere (McLean 1996, chap. 6). Transcriptions of some of the Ormanno letters are available in Guasti (1873).
as if to create through the construction of the letter a view of the facts and the alter’s character that would of themselves demand that the favor be supplied: “My honor I know I do not have to recommend to you” (case 5); “I have faith in you as in a dear father” (case 5); “I know that you desire that I have honor” (case 74); “I will have entered a new labyrinth if you do not help me—as I have a firm hope you will” (case 74); “I am most certain, wherever you find yourself I cannot have anything other than honor” (case 6); “You being there, [the galley] cannot be other than well armed” (case 75). This is particularly noteworthy near the beginning of the first letter in a place where medieval letter writers would have inserted a captatio benevolentiae—a rhetorical gesture designed to flatter and curry the favor of the recipient. Ormanno writes, “You are on the job: I think for all of this the galley will be furnished.” Further, Ormanno portrays his relationship with Averardo using the customary imagery of a father-son relationship. The opening salutation of the first two letters and the fourth is “Dearest like a father”; in the first letter he writes, “Consider it as if this affair were touching your son, although I don’t want so much, but I do have faith in you as in a dear father”; in the second letter we find “in you I trust as in a dear father.” This likening of the patron-client role relationship to the father-son role relationship appears repeatedly in Alberti’s Della famiglia and was ubiquitous throughout Florentine popular culture, perfectly appropriate when the recipient of a letter is considerably older than its sender, as Averardo was considerably older than Ormanno. Finally, Ormanno offers the customary assurances of a willingness to respond to his patron’s wishes: “I would be next to you at your every command” (case 5); “I am at your disposal” (case 5); “I would ever be ready for any command of the Dieci” (case 74); “Concluding, again I recommend myself to you” (cases 74, 6, and 75).

But Ormanno is inordinately adamant at the end of his first letter that he is concerned about his personal honor: “You hear the need of my honor, for you initiated it, and likewise you may give it its fulfillment.” In so writing, Ormanno links his own sense of honor to that of Averardo, drawing a boundary around the two of them and claiming they are linked by a common motivation leading to a common path of action. This is the third time honor has been mentioned in the first letter, but its salience is

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18 “Voi siete insulato. Penso per tutto questo la galea sarà fornita.” Note that Ormanno uses the perfect future tense here—not the conditional (sarebbe fornita) nor the subjunctive (sia fornita), again suggesting certainty of being helped.

19 However, it is worth noting that 12 other opening salutations in this data set of office letters share this trait of addressing the recipient as “father” or “like a father,” including nine others addressed to Averardo (cases 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 20, 63, and 64).
increased further in the second letter, where Ormanno alludes to his honor fully six times. This amplification of the honor frame gives the first two letters a certain urgency: "Perhaps it would be well now more than ever to start, I don't say to conclude things, but to show our intentions and to write to officials, comrades and also the sailors that they take up no other exercises away from here such that when the time comes none of them will be missing." Whereas in the first letter, Ormanno makes the customary claim that he will do "what I think will be pleasing to you and others and to do from now on what goes towards my honor and advantage," in the second letter he exclaims, "I would rather die than turn back at the expense of my honor." Honor now apparently exceeds life itself as a value; how inappropriate it would be now to speak openly of "advantage." The second letter also contains more extravagant pleas for assistance and more interpretive effort from Ormanno concerning the motivations and opinions of various actors.

For certain, Averardo, if this galley be armed with men well-chosen and well-tested, we will have honor; if the opposite, we will face great danger, and you are aware of this. The best thing is always to be prepared. Rinieri Lotti and Banco [Bencivenni], who is here in the galeotta, conspire in not taking care to arm the galley, and with dishonorable words against the last consuls, and against me. It's all wrong; and God knows it, that nothing but honor pulls me here.

Note how starkly Ormanno paints the alternatives here: we will have honor if you follow my advice, shame and humiliation if you do not. And here also, "we" has multiple senses: we the commune will succeed but also we—Ormanno and Averardo—will share in the honor of having done what is best for the commune. The pronoun "we" is used inclusively to link Ormanno's private destiny to that of Averardo and to the publicly prized destiny of the commune (cf. O'Barr 1982). By contrast, Rinieri Lotti and Banco Bencivenni are represented by Ormanno as being outside the

10 Whereas Ormanno repeatedly asserts his obsession with his own honor, his father, Rinaldo, guarded his honor through silences. In his correspondence with the Dieci (a committee delegated directive responsibility for the Lucca war), Rinaldo repeatedly refused their framing of his actions in terms of personal responsibility and the jeopardization of his honor, claiming that he was acting in a way conducive to protecting their honor but only his own well-being. When the Dieci claimed to have defended his honor from vicious rumors in the city, Rinaldo's response was not a forceful claim to honor but an implicit denial that his honor could ever have been at issue. In discourse with those outside his own family, Rinaldo does not even countenance a framing of his honor as a point of contention. This difference has obvious methodological relevance for any form of content analysis, for while the presence of keywords and images often signifies active construction of a frame, their absence may likewise be strategic and significant, even though this is not commonly captured effectively through routine statistical and content-analytic methods.
circle of respect for honor: they speak disrespectfully of the previous set of officials and of Ormanno himself.

In the postscript to the second letter, Ormanno continues to distinguish himself from Banco Bencivenni:

I have from Ser Mariotto Bencini, your notary here, that Banco writes a long letter to the consuls, which contains many things at my expense, etc.; and everything he says is the will and opinion of you consuls. I know they are his own; he is a man who sows scandal. I believe he will return here soon; how much more of his bad morals have your friends heard. He is a person who has done badly for himself, and does not take care of the honor of his companion more than his own.

Banco, says Ormanno, misrepresents the opinions of others and treats honor selfishly. His character failings (his “bad morals”) are made out to be directly detrimental to the execution of communal policy. Implicitly, Ormanno suggests that he is a different sort of person and more trustworthy than Banco. Ormanno “speaks for another” here (cf. Schifferin 1993) and relies on the spoken authority of someone whom he can be reasonably sure Averardo will trust, the notary Bencini. Thus, his speaking for another is distinguished from Banco’s. Again, he draws an inclusive boundary around himself and Averardo and excludes Benciveni from the circle of “honorable people,” using the renarration of gossip in the city to buttress his claim.2)

For you were the reason I was elected chief of this blessed galley, I know you desire that I have honor, the which I hope to have by the grace of God, if it be made well-armed, and with experienced men, and not dictated by friendship, as it seems to me Rinieri and Banco wish it. Concluding, again I recommend myself to you. My honor gathers itself now, in arming this galley well from stem to stern.

Note especially in this concluding passage from the end of the second letter how Ormanno asks for a decision in favor of honor, and therefore a decision against friendship (amicizia): deserved patronage over partisanship. This juxtaposition and ranking of relevant motivations is actively introduced by the letter’s author. Much as in the letter from the notary Iacopo di Antonio di Salvestro to Matteo Strozzi discussed above, the supplicant assertively and contextually establishes the relevant frame for understanding his request: the relevant frame is his (constructed) image of his private motivation—here honor, not partisanship. Patronage is ac-

\footnote{Similarly, in his third letter, Ormanno reiterates the need for his allies and supporters to get talking about his appointment, as though talk in itself could bring about a more favorable decision-making climate. In this way, too, he contextualizes his request in terms of the favorable disposition expressed toward it by relevant outside actors (Gumperz 1992).}
ceptable if based on the merits of the candidates and their prospects for performing their assigned duties well, and Ormanno argues that a sense of honor, which he possesses in spades, is the prime requisite for the task at hand.

The same message is conveyed slightly differently in the next letter (case 6). Where Ormanno does mention friends here, near the beginning of the letter, they are “your” friends, not “our” friends. Toward the end of the letter, “we” (Ormanno and his soldiers, the commune, Ormanno and Averardo) is used inclusively to link Ormanno’s personal honor to Averardo’s, as it had been in the second letter. A similar use of pronouns occurs in the fourth letter (case 75):

... for you know what must be done with enemies at sea, and especially with armed galleys in the Riviera. I think, by the grace of God, if I go up, I will do honor to whomever has done it to me, and I will make a believer of anyone who speaks badly; for everything proceeds from envy. It pleases me that Messer Rinaldo and you have been together; he wrote of this to me. Some desire his return, and those who wish him ill will desire it most. Even so, there appear to the Dieci for now proofs that he can do some good in this blessed enterprise, in which consists the exaltation of all your friends, and especially considering that it is by the Dieci: what a great reprisal it is to the adversaries, and does them quite a lot of damage.

Ormanno is “inside” with respect to Averardo’s honor calculus but outside his circle of “friends.” Implicitly, Averardo is entitled to a friendship (read “politically partisan”) network—and one clearly existed (Kent 1978)—but Ormanno is not in it. Partisanship and patronage networks, based respectively on favoritism and merit, are constructed as divergent in these letters.31

Finally, these letters show us something concerning the issue of making and breaking frames. In three letters, Ormanno frames Averardo as a father, as a superior; but halfway through the second letter, he momentarily steps out of this deferential role and says, “Per certo, Averardo”—“for certain, Averardo.” This is an address to a peer, not a father; and it cues a plea for honor. So despite the patronal beginning, this is not a letter

31 “It seems there are some interested in seeing me remain on land, even if it’s a done deal. When shortly we will be able to speak of it, I will tell you. I am not making an estimate at present, although I would have fifteen: days ago, the way things are happening and it seems to me a thousand years before Messer Rinaldo returns from there, and this is pleasing to all of your friends. May Our Lord conduct things in the best way.”

At the end of the fourth letter, Ormanno recommends Messer Batista Durazino of Genova to Averardo, calling him “our friend” (nostro amico), but he goes on to clarify his meaning by saying, “He has always been a friend of the Florentines,” underscoring that he uses the notion of friendship here in a military context and “our” in reference to the commune.
sequence about favoritism but about honor and honor’s due. Ormanno breaks through the frame set up in the salutation, as if his true self must speak through the decorous forms with which he began. It may seem that this insistence stems from his impetuous and arrogant character, just as he claims in a later letter that all criticism of him stems from envy (invidia). But whatever its source, it is as if his inner self is being sincerely represented here. The way this self and its aims are linked to Averardo’s evolves across episodes. At the beginning, Ormanno practices a kind of extension technique (Snow et al. 1986); his promise that “I will await whatever they and your companions there will say, and immediately I will obey as much as is assigned to me,” communicates the message, “I can conform to your plans and expectations.” But later, he seems to say, “Do well by me and you will discover your reward in the honor I will reflect onto you”—that is, “Assuming you are an honorable man, you cannot fail to act in the way I request of you.” Stated thus, his approach resembles more Snow’s discussion of bridging, where the recipient of a message is invited to bend so as to meet its sender, rather than the sender marketing himself or itself as conforming to the recipient’s expectations or desires. Overall, Ormanno fluctuates between these modes of bringing Averardo’s interests into congruence with his own, rather as clientage typically oscillates between gestures of deference and defiance (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984).

Although the first letters set up honor as Ormanno’s cardinal motivation, a motivation that implies he will dependably pursue certain kinds of action, this frame is noticeably adjusted in the last two letters here. The opening of the first of these marks a critical moment and bears being reproduced at length.

Until now I have written to you concerning the matter of the galley in one manner, and now I speak in another. It seems to me they intend not to arm the galley for now, which is a great happiness to me. And if my father was not returning, I did not see a way of being able to leave earlier anyway. It seems to me the affair has transpired well, and according to my wishes (desiderio). I did not want to refuse, so as not to give pleasure to our enemies (nostri nemici), for they would have said that I had done it from cowardice or fear that someone else might be put in my place. If this had been the case, I would not have given so much trouble to [our?] friends (agli amici). The fact is, with time, everything comes. I thank you very much for everything you have contrived (apertata) on my behalf.

“Until now I have written . . . in one manner, and now I speak in another.” This sentence betokens a change in frame, a subtly different tactic for speaking and—seemingly—a more honest representation of his motivations. Here it is as if Ormanno modestly reconstructs an interpretation of his earlier presentation of self—a new keying. Earlier, he had taken a stand against threats to (and aspersions on) his honor. Now he shows
himself more patient and willing to let the affair develop as Averardo had contrived it should; and lo and behold, he claims this accords with his “private” wishes. Suddenly, Ormanno offers a “backstage” explanation to the effect that his “onstage” zeal for honor was wrapped up with sustaining appearances, to quell gossip in the city.

Take note: this is the gossip of “our” enemies within the city. Unless his quest were fully honorable (and moderate) in his own eyes, Ormanno now claims, he would not have given so much trouble to his and Averardo’s friends. This is post hoc accounting—frame construction on the go—and through it, Ormanno subtly suggests a drift to a more intimate relation with the Medici—whether true (sincere) or not. He says, in effect, “I spoke to you, Averardo, in a way consistent with how I had to act with others in order to maintain my reputation.” Like his father before him, Ormanno felt damned if he did and damned if he didn’t: by refusing to go unarmed, his enemies would call him a coward; by proceeding rashly, he would stand accused of having too much concern for place and too little sense of civic responsibility. This situation required subtle management. In the last letter, Ormanno simplifies the request: “Concerning the talk one hears here about this galley, I want to beg that you arrange through your office that I be called there. Give unto me the spirit to make Messer Rinaldo happy, and to see that everyone who has exerted himself (s’è aoperato) on my behalf will have satisfaction.” And only in this last letter does Ormanno use the verb pregare, the primary verb in patronage supplication; its absence in earlier letters could hardly fail to communicate to Averardo his expectation of satisfaction and his effective treatment of Averardo as an equal. Only at the end does his writing turn into a properly framed request and come into line with the filial framing used in the earlier letters, by which time, however, he has traversed considerable terrain in laying bear his complex motivations, far surpassing Piero Alberti’s simple formula for dealing with different alters. Throughout, Ormanno communicates the context of his action and motivation. Context and motive are not independent of the text, but rather they are constructed and updated through it. It is through discourse as a form of agency that placement in social and cultural space is communicated. Conversely, through the complex representation of the relationship between Averardo and Ormanno, we can sense the tensions and conflicting significances that particular network ties could have.

We are still faced with the challenging task of describing why Ormanno demonstrated this change in tone. Was this elaborate rhetoric (in Wayne Booth’s [1983] sense, i.e., a structured, authoritative telling) about honor credible to Averardo? The answer, for any skeptics, is a qualified yes. We do not know if Ormanno went to sea, but (a) we do know from the beginning of MAP II, 168 that Averardo did respond to Ormanno’s letters,
American Journal of Sociology

(b) we know from other sources (i.e., Ormanno’s letters from his own father) that people were talking about his appointment and that Averardo was trying to do something, and (c) we even know that some of the Medici partisans, whose correspondence to Averardo survives, thought that Ormanno’s request was worthy of being satisfied.14

In the first place, Ormanno came from a family inordinately attentive to honor, and he likely felt Averardo would respond to an honor-based plea. By contrast, the emerging tensions between the two families meant that Ormanno’s request could not be credibly based on a self-portrait claiming partisan amicitia with Averardo. The change of tone in the last two letters is not something planned from the outset. Instead it emerges in the course of the interaction in response to external constraints: threats to his honorable reputation from a group of enemies who wanted to find fault with him goaded Ormanno into seemingly rash statements. Inherent in his situation is that Ormanno must orchestrate an image of himself for two audiences simultaneously, offering to only one of them (Averardo) a theatrical aside about his “true” feelings. Once his reputation for honor is salvaged, Ormanno revises the presentation of himself to assure Averardo that they are on the same wavelength. Throughout, the relationship between Ormanno and Averardo is framed through words that texture the image of the letter writer and shape or construct the proper attitude of the reader. Ormanno sought a determinate favor that would allow him to execute his self-image as a man of honor and a patriot of the commune, through a studied activation and structuring of his relationship with an important gatekeeper for favor. In these cases and others, frame assemblage, frame breaking, and narrations of one’s experiences and motives

14 Here see letters to Averardo from Mariotto di Francesco Segni (MAP II, 196; case 11 in the service sector of fig. 2); Michelozzo di Bartolomeo Michelozzi (MAP II 201; case 13 in the amicitia sector of fig. 2), and Mariotto di Francesco di Giovanni and Riccardo di Nicolo Fagni (MAP II, 221; case 76 in the service sector of fig. 2). Segni’s letter Interestingly enough tries to piggyback a recommendation for Iacopo di Tommaso di Messer Castellano Frescobaldi onto the endorsement of Ormanno, while Michelozzi’s similarly piggybacks a recommendation of his brother onto his understanding of Ormanno’s situation. Fagni writes, in part, “at your request, and on account of his virtù, we arranged that Ormanno would be elected padrone of the galley... and having heard this day the Dieci has committed to your office the fact of arming the ship and picking the leader and everything, may we remind you most urgently of your honor and ours, which is that Ormanno command it, and that your office provide everything he needs, for it being otherwise, it would mean a loss of honor for Ormanno and us, and it being ours, so too would it be yours.” Thus, Fagni engages in the same play of drawing group boundaries using the concept of honor as did Ormanno earlier, suggesting the group implications of challenges to individual honor. Fagni concludes by reminding Averardo, “We are certain, on account of his virtù and his good soul, he will serve the commune most well. And if you were not also certain of this, you would not have spoken as urgently as you did.”

84
comprise techniques that had evolved, in the context of a fluid clientelistic politics of opportunities and favors, to depict motivation and support interpersonal credibility.

CONCLUSION

This article has aimed, first, to outline a research strategy that interleaves our understanding of culture with our understanding of agency. This means regarding agents as bricoleurs putting together building blocks available to them from the cultural background in both formulaic and improvisational ways, in episodes of interaction, with an eye toward building relations with each other. One may say, in other words, that culture happens in the interactions between actors and that it is characterized by an interaction between available cognitive frames and the innovative gestural, written, or conversational agency of these actors. This article has built particularly on the work of Goffman (1974) and his successors for an approach to culture and agency that is sensitive to this reality while also providing us with a list of framing techniques that structure the narrative in particular episodes of discursive interaction.

Rather than simply assuming which frames of meaning commonly show up in strips of activity of a given type, we can use content analysis and multidimensional scaling to provide an image of a cultural space with more than two simple polar conceptual positions and label those positions; and we can inductively generate an image of cultural space that identifies routines or simply constructed strips of activity and, by contrast, unusual or outlying strips. These techniques would appear useful in discerning empirically (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, p. 1442) the structure of a variety of hypothetically imaginable "culture structures" (Kane 1991) and the fabric of a variety of group memberships.15

Further, this article has documented some of the cultural work behind the emergence of social network ties. I demonstrated in table 2 that placement of actors in social networks affected to a noteworthy extent the way

15 Among the settings in which such techniques have already or might in the future be profitably applied are the practices and style of seeking social relationships (guanxi) in China, ably discussed by Yang (1994), which may evolve with the shift toward regional economic development and the replacement of party cadres with economically oriented managers in Chinese enterprises; techniques for establishing culturally sensitive business relationships in the global economy; analysis of letters of recommendation or interview processes for the hiring of new personnel, whether in the academy or in business enterprises; and understanding how and why individuals use idiosyncratic verbal signs such as nicknames (cf. Gambetta 1993, chap. 7), slang, or gender stereotypes (cf. Holland and Skinner 1987) to achieve a desired membership within particular social groups.
In which they went about constructing their relations with others. Yet the relationship between structural placement and discursive strategy is not a one-way street. Rather than it being only networks that create an environment in which certain schemata make more sense and are more activated than others, certain schemata must make certain network ties more meaningful or more activated than others. The qualitative analysis undertaken here highlights how social relations are represented and constructed, foregrounded or foregrounded, sometimes reinforced and sometimes transformed, through discourse. The letters effectively tell brief stories about how to construe the relationship between individuals and about individuals’ commitment to social groups, using practically and normatively sanctioned framings to accomplish this goal. This storytelling is clearly true of other spheres besides office holding. The emergence and solidification of social ties is inherently mediated by representations of the meaning of those ties. Failure to acknowledge the cultural construction of social networks means we see only half the real picture, making it harder for ourselves to understand the noise that inevitably accompanies reading personal loyalties off of network patterns and making the entry of actors into spatially remote networks much harder to explain. Moreover, actors frequently seek opportunities to gain leverage from social groups to which they are already tied by seeking out contact with others across group boundaries. Networks typically provide only a snapshot of this constantly renegotiated reality.

Once we recognize these facts, we are better positioned to understand that entry into network positions is typically more open to competition than we might think, and we are better able to account for success in assuming network positions in terms of the rhetorical and narrative elements utilized in seeking out those positions. The differential expertise of actors in discursive structures has determinate impact on their network structural chances or opportunities. Furthermore, the manner in which actors negotiate their entrance into social ties has determinate consequences for the kind and strength of obligations those ties are able to exert upon them in turn; that is, the choice of frame establishes the terms of one’s relationship.

For instance, not only does the notion of “marriage” carry with it certain shared understandings, rules, expectations, symbols, and so on, but individual marriages are heavily negotiated ties. See, e.g., the letter of Federigo Sassetto to Niccolo di Jacopo Strozzi of December 4, 1433 (C.S. III, 113:11). “For love of me, take the trouble of being with Neri Bartolini and with Pagolo and Domenico, and exert yourselves together to search out how this girl [Federigo’s sister] may be married. Advising you that this is one of the major thoughts I have in this world, I have written of this to Neri and Pagolo and Domenico and if it appears possible to you, together with our other relatives, speak of it with Andrea de’ Pazzi.” Also see Fabòri (1991).
Civic republicanism was only one of the frames available in Renaissance Florence to represent oneself and to initiate relations with others. Yet whichever frame was used, certain recognizably modern techniques arose—albeit cloaked in the unfamiliar rhetoric of honor and magnificence—by which to represent publicly the individual’s private motivations. And there is sometimes, though not always, good reason to believe these public representations and posturings corresponded, in the spirit of Adolfo Alberi’s remarks at the outset, to very deep constructions of identity. A letter from one Mariotto di Marco to Agnolo di Palla Strozzi on October 20, 1439 (C.S. III, 128:94) alerts us to the constitutive power of relationships. At the end of the letter, Mariotto speaks candidly about his efforts at establishing himself in Florentine society:

And do not be surprised that in my sign-off I adopted such presumption as to enoble myself a little, in the desire to begin a family name (lineage) in calling myself “dalla palla,” for a little while it has come to me to do that which has not been my usual custom, to sign my name in this way, and you know I want to hold onto it, despite the fact that I have seen, and see, all the thousands of knaves each [wanting] to make a lineage, those who do not add one florin of taxes.

This letter, signed “your most humble servant,” reminds us that a lineage was a highly valued commodity in Renaissance Florence. It gave one a patina of respectability, a way of establishing an identity in the scheme of communal politics and the commune’s history. The family ricordanza established one’s unique identity in the context of a line of noteworthy historical personages (Branca 1986). All the more surprising then that Mariotto chooses, not a distinctive ancestor, nor a distinctive legacy, nor a distinctive hometown or territory, but his relationship with Agnolo di Palla as the substance of his, so to speak, primary public and personal identity. In a society where a surname is a token of merit, Mariotto chooses a token that can hardly signify personal autonomy. His is an identity crafted, and represented to itself, in relationship.

As Allan Silver has noted, “The conditions of Renaissance political life did not diminish the supreme importance of practical acts as forms of help between friends, but subtilized and complicated the relationship between acts and speech” (1989, p. 288). Words in the Renaissance were a crucial medium for expressing one’s intentions and for evaluating the motives of others—but words were not necessarily a reliable mirror of the soul (cf. Neuschel 1989). Further research must investigate empirically how, or whether, more sophisticated techniques of self-presentation emerged as the realization grew of how misleading words could be and as the supply of opportunities for advancement changed. Such research demands not only longitudinal analysis of Florentine patronage networks but also analysis of the rhetorics used outside the political sphere and comparative
American Journal of Sociology

work on techniques of self-presentation and the efficacy of these techniques in different historical cases.

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