"Close to Home": The Work of Avoiding Politics

Nina Eliasoph

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NINA ELIASOPH

University of Wisconsin–Madison

> If it's not something that [pause] effects [pause] my
> [pause] family, I don't see [pause] me [pause] doing
> it. [Speeds up] And-I-mean-of-course-nuclear-war-
> *could*-affect-my [chuckles] family. But I still don't –
> if it's not local, I mean, I'm more – maybe it's
> small-minded.
> > (*Sherry*, a schools volunteer, in an interview)

Was she really as small-minded as she claimed to be? "I care about issues that are close to home," "I care if it affects me personally," "I care if it's for my children": these are the familiar phrases that many Americans use to explain political involvement and apathy. Journalists, activists, and theorists often take these phrases at face value; politicians base social policies on them, trying to play to voters whom they imagine to be self-interested and short-sighted, cutting funds for projects that do not seem "close to home." The phrases are usually interpreted as transparently obvious indications of citizens' self-interest and lack of broad political concern – their "small-mindedness." But these insist-ant, extravagant expressions of self-interest do not simply indicate clear, straightforward self-interest or parochial thinking. The phrases work hard. Activists, intellectuals, and other concerned citizens often assume that someone like Sherry just doesn't care or is self-interested or ignorant; we try to draw people like her into political participation by impressing upon them that they should care (perhaps by telling them how nuclear war might affect their kids), or telling them not to be so self-interested.

This article shows just how hard someone such as Sherry has to work to avoid expressing political concern. Penetrating this pervasive *culture of political avoidance* requires a new way of understanding this thing that sounds like apathy and self-interest. Using examples from a two-

year fieldwork and interview study among volunteers, activists, and recreation groups in a sprawling West Coast suburb, this article shows how much emotional and interactional weight these common phrases bear; expanding from the case of "close to home" to everyday political speech in general, the article outlines questions about culture, power, and emotions, in order to explore a way of thinking about political engagement, disengagement, and grassroots social change.

If we recognize that producing apathy takes a great deal of work, then we may find an unnoticed reserve of hope; we may begin to draw out the contradictory, tangled, democratic impetus embedded in citizens' everyday interactions – and also the impetus toward self-enclosed, narrowness embedded in these same interactions. In other words, by paying attention to the ways people actually talk in these groups, we can begin to understand the politics of civil society – sometimes participating in civic groups expands citizens' horizons, sometimes it shrinks them, sometimes it does both at once.

In listening to how people actually talk politics, instead of focussing just on inner beliefs and knowledge, this article takes up a longstanding invitation from political cultural theory. Theorists of democratic participation[1] have long put citizens' open-ended deliberation at the center of democratic politics. A. R. Simonds makes this point succinctly, saying that the researcher's quest should be to understand

> not so much the *content* of ideas and values as the *context* of meaning by which they are formulated and shared. This means that we can never get a grip on the problem [in Simonds's case, the problem of why majority vote in democracies did not overturn vast socioeconomic inequality] by drawing up a laundry list of beliefs [and sorting them according to which classes interests they serve].[2]

And perhaps avoiding the laundry list is especially compelling since the fall of communism and the rise of identity politics; fundamentalism and ethnic "self-determination" has made it so hard for bewildered citizens to tell what is "left" or "right" and orient themselves in an easy, automatic way (and maybe that is why many intellectuals who once simply called themselves leftists have become – to coin a term – "public sphere-itarians," who seeks, as Chantal Mouffe puts it, "the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago"[3]). Focussing on the public sphere transforms the search for a static product – that laundry list of facts or beliefs – into a search for a process, a process of conversation that cultivates or impairs citizens' abilities to talk, think, and imagine together.

Investigating political talk leads some scholars[4] to deplore the fact that Americans explain so much action in terms of self-interest, even when the "second language" of responsible, concerned citizenship would make more sense – volunteer paramedics, soup kitchen volunteers, and other seemingly generous souls often claim that they do what they do out of "self-interest." These scholars counterpose two common American moral "languages" – the language of self-interest and the language of responsible, concerned citizenship, solidarity, obligation, and connection. They say that the language of self-interest often crowds the language of solidarity out of American public discourse and dulls the public imagination. This article fills in here, showing just how and where, in practice, the one language can come to crowd the other out. For the active, dedicated, community-oriented volunteers portrayed here, for example, professions of self-interest worked to *protect* a belief in the democratic ideal, to feel effective within a small circle of concern. In practice, the two languages were not opposed, but worked symbiotically. Again, what sounded like a simple lack of ability to speak in broader terms was actually quite active and energetic.

It took what I will call "cultural work" for volunteers to transmute feelings of powerlessness into expressions of self-interest. Coming from a range of perspectives, many theorists of public life[5] argue that structural powerlessness, inner feelings, and cultural expressions cannot be distilled out of each other; each layer of experience depends on the others – and the public sphere is vital precisely because these levels of experience never match up perfectly. This article spotlights three moments in the *intellectual*, *emotional*, and *interactional* process of everyday political meaning-making: citizens' 1. implicit knowledge about their own *structural power*, 2. implicit agreement about what kinds of *feelings* citizens should have, and 3. implicit agreement about what the *very act of speaking about politics* in public means. Others have asked similar questions: Simonds discusses the process as "entail[ing] three sorts of judgments (on the part of the citizen): ... judgments about what *is*, judgments about what is *good or desireable*, and judgments about what is *possible*."[6] Gary Alan Fine and Kent Sandstrom examine "ideology in action" and outline four themes.[7] Of course, whether one highlights three or four is somewhat arbitrary; the point is to develop concepts that sensitize us to the process of political meaning-making in everyday conversation; in fact, what is most interesting is how these elements are mutually implicated, inseparably intertwined.[8] Fine and Sandstrom do not show how their four elements work together; Simonds theorizes that his first element of

competence is the necessary foundation for the second, and the second for the third. This article builds on these recent suggestions to examine the politics of everyday sense-making in interaction, showing how these elements work together in surprising ways. I highlight these three because each describes part of the process of transforming political engagement into disengagement, and each corresponds to a compelling body of social thought. But each of these bodies of thought misses a level of analysis that the others offer; each makes sense only in relation to the others; each is contingent on and complementary to the others.

The next section briefly sketches the puzzle of "close to home." The three sections after that analyze these mysterious expressions of self-interest, by following the three clues outlined above. After that, I compare the volunteer groups to two other styles: an activist style cultivated in a group that was trying to prevent a toxic incinerator from being built in a town next door to the volunteers; and the "cynical" style of a group of friends who attended a country-western bar together, a mile down a six-lane commercial strip from volunteers' meeting places. The point of these illustrations is both to show that taking any political position entails "cultural work," and to show how to use the concept. The final section of the article briefly points out what the idea of "cultural work" adds to four specifically cultural interpretations of political disconnection.

And when we attune ourselves to the ways that the elements of cultural work intertwine and mutually implicate each other, citizens' self-interested rhetoric often sounds very mutable, interactive, responsive, even caring, and not just a bald revelation of naked selfishness. Listening this way can turn citizens' self-interested rhetoric inside out; it shows how citizens use this way of talking to preserve a sense that what they are doing together matters, that citizens' solidarity matters. In doing so, they often assume that they have to push the wider world of politics away.

The puzzle

Why is "close to home" a puzzle? Isn't it obvious that people are just naturally self-interested? In interviews, most volunteer group participants used the labels "close to home," "for the children," and "affects me personally" *interchangeably* with "do-able" and "not political." Within two sentences of expressing concern about a political problem

that seemed "undo-able," out of their control, typical volunteers would always shift to the theme of "close to home," *without noticing the shift*.

For example, in an interview with me, Lisa, a volunteer with an anti-drugs group, circled over and over again to the topic of the local nuclear battleship base:[9]

> There's probably at least four nuclear battleships over there at all times. You can *see* them ... they're black, and there's scaffolding on them and stuff.... They're dangerous ... scary ... I mean, half those shipyard workers are on dope all the time. It makes me nervous. There's a park on the top of the hill. They come up and smoke dope at lunch and go back to work on the ships. They have spills quite often. I mean, we don't know about it, but my husband was on a ship working, so I know.

Another volunteer, Carolyn, lived closer to the weapons base. A chemical plant just upstream from her had had a huge spill a few months earlier; oil lapped up onto her house, that jutted out on stilts over the bay. "The beach was *covered* with oil. You could see it on the rocks and in the water. It was sad," she said in an interview at her kitchen table with her eighteen-year-old son, in front a picture window with an eye-level view of the nuclear weapons base and the glimmering Sound. Every twenty minutes or so a nuclear battleship slipped by. But when I asked Lisa and Carolyn whether they had ever thought about getting involved in doing something about the battleships or the oil spills, they both said, in separate interviews, that those issues were "not close to home," and did not really "touch" them personally. And they both said, in almost identical words, "and anyway, what would I do, bomb the place?" referring to the chemical plant and the weapons base. Carolyn said it twice.[10] Instead they were both involved in the anti-drugs group.

After participating in the anti-drugs group for several months, I asked members why they were involved in this group. In this interview, as in the others, I listed some of the other groups I was studying – the PTA-style schools group, a recreation group, a group that was trying to influence U.S. foreign policy, and an anti-nuclear group – asking how involvement in the group I was interviewing compared to involvement in these other community groups.

All six members present agreed: "It's close to home," and "do-able." One said that, compared to nuclear issues, "this (the drug) issue's a lot closer to home." There was a chorus of agreeable murmurs from the

others. This member described the time his house was robbed, which he assumed had "something to do with drugs. So, it's a lot more immediate than nuclear war. You know, that's an important issue, too, but" – and here, Lisa filled in, weaving together themes of "close to home" and power:

> that just seems sort of distant. I can't quite get to those people, to deal with ... or even nuclear power. Shoot, with where we live, we can't be too allergic to nuclear power. There's six or seven plants on battleships here.

Another member soon summed up: "It has to do with something that's close to you. See, the nuclear stuff is all around us but it's not in our backyard, or across the street, whereas *this is*," referring to the drug problem.

Referring to the group that was trying to influence U.S. policy abroad, Carolyn said, "I would much rather look for something close to home, close to me." But, she chuckled, she *was* very concerned about three whales that had been in the news that week, trapped in Arctic ice with an international rescue force trying to dig them out. "Now, whales, they were far away, but they're *animals!*" Carolyn laughed at herself, noticing that the habitual phrase "close to home" did not exactly fit. Lisa added, "You know, there's only three of them, there are not thousands of them." Carolyn agreed, continuing, "But they're defenseless and, I don't know, I would rather help closer to home, I don't know, that's just – and then the other is just so large, political, and" – and she trailed off.

Thus, conversation in volunteer groups revolved almost entirely around logistical challenges and fundraising: the Parent League designed an ingeniously portable concession stand to cook hot dogs and hamburgers at high school sports events, built a throne for the Homecoming Queen, solved the puzzle of keeping 1,000 cans of soda cold when transporting them to the senior class picnic, raised an enormous amount of money – over eight thousand dollars – with raffles and "feeds" (spaghetti, fish, etc.), and more.

Why did the volunteers say the nuclear battleships and environmental problems were not close to home? The groups portrayed here drive home the point that retreating into private life is not as easy as it seems. All were within a twenty-minute drive that could pass through a nuclear battleship base containing a thirty-acre toxic pit that the Envi-

ronmental Protection Agency called "dangerous"; an Air Force site that shipped arms supplies all over the world was rumored to contain nuclear waste materials and weapons, and was slated for a Superfund cleanup; two other toxic military cleanup sites; six chemical plants – there were four major fires or spills in the two and a half years of my fieldwork; a planned toxic waste incinerator; and two other big plants eight miles upstream that emitted carcinogenic and ozone-depleting chemicals. During my fieldwork stint, various environmental and dis-armament groups held demonstrations at several of these plants. As one volunteer pointed out, nearly all the fish had died, and all the fishing clubs had died as well. Certainly, these issues were not literally "distant," or "removed." Literally, these problems were in their backyards.

The illustrations I use to make this article's theoretical point come from a study that examined how political disengagement was socially produced in interaction, and was not just a by-product of "inner" beliefs or "outer" structural conditions.[11] I spent over two years from 1989–1991 as a participant-observer in a range of groups in U.S. civil society: two recreational groups, both at a country-western dance club and fraternal organization; and a network of volunteer groups, includ-ing, with most intensive scrutiny, and anti-drugs groups and a PTA-style organization; and two activist groups – an anti-toxics group and a disarmament group. I picked these groups because advocates of democracy have long looked to groups that work on small, local issues as potential schools for wider political concern; I wanted to know what happened within these groups that evoked, or curtailed, public con-cern for the greater good.[12] Of course, I did not expect these groups to devote much time to publicly-minded political discussion (which I define not as a topic but as a style of talking that implies connection to the wider world), but I was interested in whether and how political conversation ever happened, and whether groups seemed actively to avoid political conversation.

In all the groups, I did whatever other regular group members did: go to meetings, hearings, demonstrations, raffles, track meets, fairs, pa-rades, fashion shows, rodeos, theme parks, and parties. I listened to participants' interactions with each other in a wide range of contexts, and to their interactions with the institutions that surrounded their groups – social service agencies that worked with the volunteers, government agencies that dealt with activists, country-western com-mercial culture that surrounded recreation group members. I was also a participant-observer among local reporters, and I analyzed news

stories.[13] The larger study shows how citizens made fine, relentless distinctions between what was sayable in one context and another: citizens sounded more public-minded in casual or intimate contexts than in public contexts; the wider the audience, the narrower were the ideas citizens could express.[14] This article focusses mainly on interviews, but without the understanding that came from fieldwork, the interviews would not have made sense. I heard the "close to home" refrain over and over from volunteers, until I could predict responses to my interview questions; in other words, until the "category was saturated," to use a standard criterion for feeling satisfied, as an observer, that one has indeed found a pattern.[15]

Power, emotions, and talk in the production of limited horizons

Clue #1: Intuiting powerlessness: "What am I gonna do – bomb the place?"

The most obvious clue to interpreting these expressions of self-interest is the unmistakable connection between participants' expressions of self-interest and their seemingly realistic assessment of their own power. In the anti-drugs group interview, Pete described the relation between the "problems of the world" and self-interest:

> I know there are things out there that affect me, you know, they, uh, bother me, but I guess I – my first priority is my home and my immediate surroundings and I'm not anxious to go out and solve the problems of the world. I guess it's just my personality, I guess. I knew someone in college who just could not – who saw all these problems and took them on as "personal," as her personal responsibility to solve all these things [he describes her briefly, saying it made her miserable to be so overwhelmed]. Of course, everyone would love to, if they had the power themselves, to stop war or end drug abuse or whatever, they'd do it, but obviously there's *a feeling of impotence* [my emphasis] when you're dealing with issues like that. Boils down to just, "find the opportunity in your life to try to make a difference, even if it's a small one."

A moment later in the conversation, he refers to this statement, summarizing it this way: "That gets back to – if I'm gonna actually expend energy to alter my lifestyle to affect one of these things, I'm probably gonna expend it where it's closer to home." The way he himself summarized the long, earlier statement shows his method for actively, imperceptibly translating "a feeling of importance" into a feeling of empowerment on small issues "close to home." This was to rename

that feeling of impotence as a lack of concern. "Close to home" and "for my children" was a package for a cluster of ideas about caring, power, and truth. Animals, like the whales stuck in Alaska, drugs and schools were "close to home." Nuclear war, the local nuclear battleship station, the local protest against U.S. policy in Central America, the local proposed toxic incinerator, and the local oil and chemical spills and explosions were not.

Members of the high school parent group used the same vocabulary, gracefully transmogrifying a feeling of impotence into a feeling of empowerment on issues labelled "close to home," and "in my interest," and "for the children." In the group interview, Danielle said, "really, I'm involved because my kids are here." Elaine said it next:

> All my efforts are geared – I will get involved in anything that involves kids.... So I'll join committees like the Just Say No committee in Amargo, that you know, for sure, is the issue of drugs, but, you know, my view, really is it's an issue about kids.

Whenever I mentioned that all the groups I studied said they were involved "for the children," volunteers would reconsider the phrase for just a moment, say that indeed anything could be considered to be "close to home" and "for the children," and then, just moments later, all would revert to the "close to home," "for the children" discourse. This vocabulary of self-interest was so automatic, volunteers could not extricate themselves from it even when they rationally knew that it did not adequately describe their motives.

This gerrymandered engagement might seem easy to explain. In appearing rationally self-interested, volunteers might appear to confirm the idea that people are "rational actors," that is, people who will bestir themselves to community action only when they think that time invested will be worth the personal payoff, and only when they cannot easily hitch a "free ride" to that personal payoff on other people's backs.[16]

But if volunteers were rationally calculating where to invest scarce energy, it was a peculiar kind of calculation: as will become more apparent below, the *goal* was to *feel* empowered; they had to forget that there were wide arenas in which they did feel powerless. If the work they did to divvy up the world into "close to home/do-able" and "not close to home/not do-able" had been conscious, it would not have

had the desired effect, of allowing them to feel hopeful, powerful, and free.[17] This is an unusual kind of calculation that works only when actors can forget they did the calculation. Instead of calculating individually, volunteers relied on a culturally standard, automatic second nature that taught them how to translate feelings of impotence into feelings of efficacy. When explaining why the disarmament activists I studied were involved in that issue, Bob, of the schools group, assumed that activists would let themselves care only because:

> Bob: They (disarmament activists) think they can mke a difference.

> Sherry: Well, I don't worry about nuclear war too much because I don't think there's a lot to do. I mean, if they bomb us, we've had it. So, why worry about it ... I'm not that concerned with it.

She was not saying that she would not waste scarce time and effort on genuine, worrisome problems because she could not fix them, but that she would not even *care* about those problems because she could not fix them. She was erasing the calculation, leaving only its results.

They could not force themselves into another vocabulary, even after they had intellectually decided that the "close to home" explanation really did not do the job. Volunteers wanted to do more than hitch a free ride to a paradise engineered by someone else. They wanted to reassure themselves and their fellow citizens, *through their own actions*, that the world makes sense because regular people really can make a difference on issues that matter to them. Volunteers were "moral" – in the sense of *meaning-making*-actors, and not simply "rational" actors.[18] In other words, if there was calculation here, it was embedded in the culture, not something each individual arrived at autonomously. Volunteers were trying to make sense of the world within that culture.

A second explanation of volunteers' speech would shift volunteers' sense of power and powerlessness onto the level of culture instead of the level of individual conscious calculation, by saying that after years of political domination, volunteers may have created a culture of silence, too hopeless even to voice feelings of outrage, too powerless even to formulate their own interests even to themselves. A society's political imagination is, according to this explanation, patched together in a way that makes domination seem natural and inevitable, odorless and invisible, "to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political and cultural system

seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense."[19] This "hegemony" is the ongoing cultural process that circumscribes the boundaries of perception, or at least of shared, discussable reality. When domination goes unnamed, popular consciousness is disorganized; when people cannot talk about domination, they cannot challenge it.[20]

This approach helps explain volunteers' political avoidance more sensitively than an approach that focusses on individual calculation and interests. The idea of hegemony rightly treats people as members of cultures, who are doing their best to make sense of discouraging circumstances, even if it means turning their backs on politics. It treats political experience as a convoluted, uncalculating, historically specific, inherently cultural, and interactive response to power and powerlessness.

But we can refine the concept of hegemony, here, by asking: how do citizens actively explain their powerlessness?[21] Volunteers' self-interest talk did indeed respond to powerlessness, but calling it simply "a response to powerlessness" is not enough. If there is no exit from the political world, then political silence must be as active and as colorful as a bright summer shadow. Developing a sense of togetherness happened in reference to a sense of powerlessness, but was not just a reaction to it; cultural work acknowledges powerlessness but does not stop there. If the ways of avoiding political engagement are potentially infinite, then why did packaging gloomy feelings inside of professions of "self-interest" feel better to volunteers? Thus, the next clue asks how *this* language in particular made the world seem to make sense, by cheering volunteers up, making a certain emotional tone possible in volunteer groups.

Clue #2: "You can have more of an impact uh ... at least you feel like you can": Feeling rules in public spaces

Volunteers *wanted* to believe that all people are aware of their own desires, are self-interested, and invest their energies wisely. Volunteers themselves strenuously tried to confirm this rational model of humanity, even if it meant making extraordinary claims about human nature:

> Carolyn: I don't think anyone does anything that is not going to benefit them in some form or another, or there'd be no point....

> Pete: Whether we admit it or not ... someone like Gandhi, you know, he may be the pinnacle of altruism, but he was doin' his stuff for his own people. [Murmurs of agreement....]

> Lisa: And he felt good about what he did [implying that "feeling good" is a self-interested benefit].

This language helped the volunteers to convince themselves of something that they earnestly wanted to believe. When I asked the forced-choice survey question, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" one typical volunteer said,

> Most of the time. Well, at least I'd like to *think* it's most of the time. Of course, I'm not so sure it really *is*. But I hope it is. So, I'd say "most of the time." Yes, put "most of the time."

Notice – neither yes nor no nor undecided was the most "real" belief here. The belief *included* an effort at convincing herself. In the interview with Carolyn and her eighteen year old son, the son made less of an effort. Each time he said that people do not get involved because they don't think it will have an effect, his mother gently corrected him, saying that people just did not have enough time. Similarly, typical volunteers responded to the question, "Can a person like you make a difference?" by saying "Yes," with an "at least I hope so" tagged on.

Typical activists, in contrast, responded to the survey question about making a difference with a "No," accompanied by a laugh on the side and an exclamation that it was amazing how active they were considering how little effect they thought they had. Cynics exclaimed "No," appending a humorous diatribe demonstrating exactly how and why they were sure the answer was unequivocally no, peppered with many examples from the newspaper. In other words, volunteers, activists, and cynics shared a scepticism about the government, but habitually displayed it differently. It was not their "inner" beliefs that differed so much as their beliefs about how and where to voice some ideas and feelings and not others. Their beliefs were not very different, but their *relations to* their beliefs were. This relation made different topics more easily discussable, different questions more easily thinkable, different activities more easy to undertake.

When a volunteer expressed a criticism of the election process on one election day, she sounded extremely apologetic about it. She did not

express her worries in the meeting, but whispered them before the meeting, while standing outside with the banquet-sized coffeemaker, waiting for the janitor to unlock the door to the meeting room. During the meeting, a fellow volunteer kept whispering to her, saying, "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get over it," and asking, "Don't you feel better now?" The problem had to be treated as if it were just "her mood," not a problem with the political system. Volunteers did not want to be too critical, too "cynical"; if the government and corporations suggested that citizens could get involved in solving the drug problem, then volunteers were willing to cooperate, even though drug abuse *could* have been considered a harder issue to solve than some environmental problems. But the volunteers meant only the consensual and non-structural aspects of drug abuse, home, children, and families. They did not want to be discouraged by problems that seemed out of their control, and the vocabulary of "close to home" helped them feel in control of "home."

Most volunteers brought up troubling issues in interviews – especially related to the environment and race – before I had a chance to do so, and then they circled back to these issues without my prompting. For example, when Lisa introduced the topic of the nuclear battleships in the group interview, I was startled – I had not selected this site with the nuclear battle station in mind.[22] "Really??" I exclaimed.

> Mel: Well, seventeen of em [which gave everyone a hearty laugh].
>
> Lisa: They're concerned about the battleship being up there, here these battleships, they run right past Pacific City all the time.
>
> Carolyn: Sometimes you wonder if people have a clue as to what's going on here [more laughter]. But I guess, you know, if we all decided that we didn't want the battleships at Amargo Flats, uh, it'd be pretty tough to change that.
>
> Mel: Yup.
>
> Carolyn: … You know I think you can have more impact uh, I don't know, at least you feel like you can [on the drug problem].

Volunteers circled over and over their local, "undo-able" concerns in painstaking detail and then banished them from the conversation by saying that they were "not close to home," or were "a matter of personal choice." For example, in the individual interview (as in the group interview briefly recounted above), Lisa brought up nuclear weapons and power, only to say toward the end of the interview that they were not a problem after all. She began:

> There's at least 2 or 3 or 4 ... there's probably at least four battleships over there at all times, and they all have a nuclear power plant on them, because they're all nuclear power battleships.... I'm sure there's no weapons over at Evergreen Island because they keep them all over at Port Amargo. But they do load up, I'm sure they go out and load up. And then they go out. Um, I don't know if they load up at Port Amargo, though. I don't think they go through the Sound with the weapons on them. I think they might load up at Sunshine Point ... they toot in and out of the Sound all the time.

With the same extremely fine-grained detail, she described the military workers' unsafe work habits, while I grew more and more agitated, worrying that hearing about such microscopic details of the battle-ships' activities was not part of my interview plan (after hearing eight volunteers follow the same pattern in interviews, however, I realized that I should not try so hard to keep them "on track" – that this pattern was itself a track). Her description continued for several minutes, while I kept trying to change the subject. Later, she said,

> I guess I don't really feel that nuclear power plants are all that horribly dangerous. I know there's a potential for danger, but I'm not [then she starts talking extremely rapidly]... I guess they don't affect me directly and they don't melt down on a daily basis and the, I mean, they do emit radioactivity and all that stuff, but there's other ways to get radioactivity.... So, I guess it doesn't really bother me.... If there was a meltdown ... then, if nothing else, I just would not live here anymore. I wouldn't want to try to solve the problem for other people.

In this fashion, she had, by the end of the interview, retracted her expressions of powerlessness and added an expression of self-interest, saying that it was a matter of personal choice, and she had control over her choices. She carved out a space for herself in which she could feel she had control, but the process of doing so took an enormous amount of cultural work.

Lisa's avid attention to/dismissal of "the problems of the world" was typical for volunteers. Pete, a chemist for a pesticide company, kept returning to the issue that especially troubled him – the environment – trying to convince himself not to worry, talking himself into corners and then back out of them. Like Lisa, who dwelled on the radioactive leaks and sloppy workers, only to end up saying that she was not bothered, high school parent Sherry dwelled in great detail on a "big," political problem that could not readily be solved "close to home" – toxic chemicals in food. After dwelling on the issue, she ended up defining it as unimportant. When I asked whether she would ever think

of getting involved in a group like the one I told her I was studying, that was against building a toxic incinerator (she had not heard of that specific anti-toxics group, so her response was not about that particular group), she spent a few words on the topic of toxic waste, then quickly jumped to the topic of food. First she brought up apples, which had just been the focus of a national controversy because of a carcinogenic pesticide, Alar. Then she brought up bananas, then potatoes which, she said with an ironic smile, have

> something put in them when they are grown, And you can't wash it off. It's something in the soil. So, you know: Do you stop eating? Good question. [Said as a final statement, not an invitation to further speculation.]

The grocery store had a sign saying their apples had not been sprayed with Alar, that she did not believe, but she said, "And, I – you know – but what do you do? You quit buying the stuff?" Next, she brought up Halloween candy, then chicken and beef, saying that there was something wrong with them, too. A while later, I asked again about toxic waste, saying that I wasn't sure I understood her answer, and she went back to talking about fruit again.

> I have some control over that. I don't have to buy that fruit. You know, it's a personal choice, like, do I buy cigarettes and take the chance that I will or will not get cancer? That's a personal choice. Same with the fruit. You know: Do I still go buy the apples and bananas that my husband goes eats every day [laughing]? He still eats'em; I still buy'em [laughing]!

Then, back to chicken:

> They say that Northern Poultry injects steroids or something like steroids [laughing] to make the chickens fatter. *I have done this* [laughing even more] – I have had the Acme Farms chicken that you buy at Foodway's and I have had Northern Poultry that you can buy at Hick's, and if you pull the skin back there's this much fat under the Northern Poultry, and hardly any under the Acme. I mean it's just this loose *stuff* hanging from the inside of the skin of one and not the other!

She did not unequivocally think my questions were absurd or offensively untrusting of chemical corporations – she herself had peered under the two chickens' skins. But she *wanted* not to be worried, so she convinced herself that it was under her control.

The point of these examples is to show that volunteers were working hard to switch off their attention to the wider world in order to main-

tain a feeling of control and sovereignty in everyday citizenship. Being a volunteer meant not only convincing oneself that good citizenship was possible, but convincing other people as well, and creating public contexts in which regular people could get together to work on community projects.[23] It meant convincing people that good citizenship is possible today, right now, in the society as it is, not in some dream-world. Rather than try to change the institutions that kept them feeling powerless (because that could require too much depressing discussion), volunteers tried to change their feelings. Good citizenship was primarily a matter of *feeling good* about the community and nation, and showing one's neighbors that people care and can be effective; cultivating the feeling of "having an impact" was, in an important way, *the same* for them as "hav(ing)... an impact." As a refrain went, "if everyone cared...." Working on feelings was, itself, the goal.

This clue that focusses on emotional tone is partly harmonious with a *psychological* family of explanations that would say that when volunteers' faith in democracy clashed with their intuitions of powerlessness, volunteers reduced the "cognitive dissonance"[24] by redefining democracy, narrowing its scope into ever smaller circles. This approach might say that volunteers tied up ambivalence, anxiety, and ambiguity into tidy packages, trying hard to forget what they knew in order to protect what they wanted to believe. Similarly, this clue could summon another psychological approach, that would say that volunteers were engaging in "psychic numbing"[25] – avoiding despair by avoiding feelings about the fate of the world altogether. Or, in a more pop-psychological vein, one might say that volunteers were "in denial." According to this psychological family of explanation, volunteers always looked on the bright side in order to keep alive an inner sense of well-being, a feeling that life is not a waste of time.

All of these psychological explanations need a complementary interpretation that highlights the interactional, cultural work of the group. Volunteers *could* have addressed dissonance, pain, powerlessness, and insecurity in any number of ways, without trying so hard to be upbeat: burning anger to fuel activism; joking cynically to feel solidarity against the forces of stupidity; cultivating a faith that God will make it all come out all right; musing about the unfathomable, inconsistent, and eternally puzzling political world while operating the Royal Dog Steamer selling the hot dogs at the track meets; or even forming a club to vent and transform feelings of powerlessness, like the early 1980s groups whose ideas are written up in Joanna Rogers Macy's *Despair and Personal*

Power in the Nuclear Age.[26] Probably most citizens feel powerless sometimes. The question is how we *present* our powerlessness to ourselves and each other: whether we protect our feelings of empowerment by telling ourselves that we do not care; or by trying only to care about problems that we implicitly assume we can easily address; or by admitting a feeling of powerlessness and then going on to do something anyway; or by throwing up our hands in despair; or by either cultivating feelings of righteous anger, resignation, heroic resolve, indifference, or delicate curiousity *about* our personal feelings of powerlessness. In other words, the question is how we cultivate some *relation to* our feelings.

There are varied cultural rules for this cultivation and expression of feeling. For the unempowered volunteer trying to feel confident that democracy is working according to its promise – as in Arlie Hochschild's examples of an unhappy bride trying to feel joy, a happy funeral attendee trying to suppress his glee, and a blasé star halfback trying to "psych himself up at a game" – there is "emotion work," that bridges the

> discrepency, between what ones does feel and what one wants to feel (which is, in turn, affected by what one thinks one ought to feel in such a situation). In response, the individual may try to eliminate the pinch by working on feeling.[27]

Different groups required different emotion work, different relations *to* feelings of powerlessness, different relations to inconsistency, doubt, ambivalence, rough edges in general. And the different groups' demands for emotion work were context-specific. Volunteeers required cheer in some situations, and could express doubts in others. The effort at being smoothly upbeat differed from one group to the next, and one context to the next.

The concept of emotion rules throws light on how hard volunteers worked to muster unequivocally upbeat feelings in group contexts. But a question remains: why did volunteeers assume that the way to be upbeat was to avoid making the connection between the local and the global, instead of talking about their worries more openly, or complaining or venting outrage? After all, the volunteers were not peasants who could starve if they offended their lords, or victims of direct censorship who had to hide their criticism of the government; they believed that they *were* free to speak their minds. So why did they assume that appearing unequivocal and happy was so urgent? Expos-

ing the rough edges of one's thoughts has often been considered the essence of democratic citizenship; George Herbert Mead, for example, would have said that good, active citizenship is *supposed* to be confusing, that thought itself is argument – that in the public realm, consistency is death.[28] The question is how willing people are to exhibit the rough edges, doubts, and challenges in public. If the need to appear unequivocally upbeat is not just a fact of human nature, and no direct censorship prevented volunteers from voicing doubts, then how did they come to assume that the way to gain a sense of control was to avoid talk, avoid debate, when other groups gained a sense of mastery by talking? What was it about political talk itself that they feared?

Clue #3: "That's rhetoric": The value of talk itself

> Clara (a schools volunteer): [A social problem is close to home] if it affects you personally and your family.... You can hold your opinions about what a country can do, or can't do, about a situation, but *that's rhetoric*.... I don't really think a person can really make a difference unless they have the *power at hand*.

Volunteers assumed that talking politics would not accomplish anything positive, it would only scare members away and undermine hope. The easy-seeming explanation of "self-interest" made apathy about un-doable problems seem self-evident, not in need of explanation or discussion. The explanation did not just *appeal* to the American tradition of individualism. It *embodied* individualism, as a practice and not just a set of beliefs, by allowing volunteers to assume that their goals were not a product of interaction and could not benefit from group discussion. Everyone was assumed always already to have personal opinions, before discussion or interaction. According to this folk theory of language, if all people are is naturally out for themselves, citizens don't need to talk (they just need to act on their beliefs or interests), and democracy is working just fine.

Volunteers assumed that citizens' talk itself would change neither individuals' opinions nor the political world. With different assumptions about how and where talk matters could come different emotion rules. For example, Patricia Waseliewski[29] shows that a pivotal moment in the life of a feminist group is when women learn to value anger, to talk about the causes of their anger, thus allowing righteous, collective anger to become a lever for critical grassroots action instead of a shameful, private sentiment. Given volunteers' low valuation of talk

itself, the best way to maintain faith and hope was to avoid expressing discouraging, critical, "cynical" thoughts and feelings in public.

Thus, in Parent League meetings, volunteers actively avoided talking about the race problems in the high school, the lack of funds for library books, heating, music, and theater supplies, and other potentially troubling topics that newcomers tried to raise. On the one hand, volunteers wanted to encourage these potential new members, but, on the other hand, they did not want to risk the sense of discouragement that wide-ranging discussion could bring. For example, the local NAACP representative came to one meeting of the Parent League to tell the group that a teacher had made racist jokes and that skinheads were recruiting on the schoolgrounds at lunchtime. He suggested getting more parents involved in the Parent League, so they could discuss these problems publicly. The parent volunteers (who were not, incidentally, all white, but who did share the distinctive "volunteer culture" I am describing in this article) barely responded, except to say that the NAACP representative should not underestimate them, because they "made efficient use of small numbers" of people, and they cited a very successful fundraiser the group held. When teachers came to meetings trying to drum up discussion about funding for theater lights, or about limiting senior year expenses for activities like the prom and the class picnic (that all together added up to over a thousand dollars), volunteers, who were usually extremely well-organized in their meetings, would wander in and out, play with their pens, and fall unusually silent. In an anti-drugs group meeting, Julie (a former anti-nuclear activist – her confrontation with feelings of powerlessness recounted above was not the only thing that made her unusual – she also sometimes tried to push volunteers to be a little more debate oriented than they were) asked what she could say when people argued against the group's plans; there was total silence following her question, until Julie brought up a logistical question. The consensus was that talking was not the point. Members had not explicitly decided not to talk; it was just part of their practical cultural work in the group context.

The ability to express broad political engagement systematically changed from one context to the next. Behind the scenes, but not in meetings, Danielle could say that it was really a disgrace that a country as rich as ours had homeless people; she said that the school should not make parents pay for kids to play in the school's swing band, and that Republican-sponsored cutbacks had harmed the school, and more. But she never spoke like this in the group context. Behind the scenes, she

spoke enthusiastically about her work with the school district to plan
ecologically-sound landscaping for a new school, but when she got to
the meeting of the parents group, the other parents translated her
excitement about the general principle of ecological groundskeeping
into "preventing hayfever in local kids." Behind the scenes, another
volunteer was a very involved union activist, talked about connections
between corporate flight and government policies, and had supported
Jesse Jackson for president in an earlier election. But in meetings, he
was very quiet and when he did speak, he sounded just like the others.
Behind the scenes, Cora, the volunteer who confessed her feelings of
cynicism while standing outside waiting for the janitor, offered quite a
wide-ranging criticism and self-criticism session before entering the
meeting: she said there were too many paid political consultants, too
few informed voters, too many non-voters; and to give added bite to
her point about her cynicism, she exclaimed with chagrin that, for the
first time, she had voted for the Democrat, *only* because he had done
her a favor. In one "public meeting" called by social service agencies,
one very old, eccentric volunteer tried to argue that our prison system
was barbaric and expensive. No one argued or agreed with his point;
the only response was one official's bland restatement of the facts he
had mentioned, and an assurance that that was the way it was. But
behind the scenes, as soon as the meeting ended, that same official, and
a social service worker, both scurried quickly over to that volunteer, to
say they both wholeheartedly agreed with the thrust of his argument,
and to discuss it a little. Behind the scenes, parents in the parent group
spoke proudly of how multiracial their children's circles of friends
were, but in meetings, the same parents were uninterested in talking
about racism. All the volunteers knew about the White Aryan Nation
music festival planned for town, but none spoke out against it; they
agreed with the mayor who said (when I interviewed him on the phone
for an out-of-town radio news station – he did not know who I was
except as a voice on the phone) that the best strategy was to

> ignore it! Don't go. Ignore it. That's the worst thing you can do to people in
> that group, I think, is deny them your attention. Make it clear you don't
> support their views, you don't support that philosophy, and then: ignore it.

Volunteers welcomed public-spirited talk, in its place; free-ranging talk
was just out of place in everyday meetings and other public settings.
Thus, after each group interview I conducted with volunteers, partici-
pants thanked me, saying they had never had the opportunity to talk
about these things together, as a group, before.

Some social researchers might argue that this treatment of political talk was natural and inevitable, since people naturally, universally avoid disagreement.[30] Volunteers themselves would have agreed with this assessment; they said, "You don't talk politics and religion with your friends," because you might disagree about such deeply held opinions. The problem with that explanation of the groups' emotional tone is that there is ample historical and cross-cultural evidence that people, especially people who know each other, can relish a good argument and do not naturally, universally avoid disagreement.[31] And the activists in this study present a counter-example, as well as do many of the volunteers themselves, in contexts other than meetings. But volunteers themselves believed these explanations. They were second-guessing what other people's perceptions of volunteer meetings would be, even if they themselves did not experience them that way – and even if, in the Parents Group, a steady stream of potential volunteers came to one or two meetings never to return, some convinced that volunteers avoided discussing race because they were simply racist. The point is that there was a *culture of political avoidance*, a common-sense understanding of what the act of talking politics itself means, not just that volunteers obeyed some natural urge to avoid disagreement.

With their taken-for-granted assessment of talk, volunteers did not simply think that talking about an undo-able social problem was a waste of time, either. It was immoral, because it could undermine their bouyant sense of the rightness of the world, by excluding "regular" people who are not always eloquent, do not have equal amounts of cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu[32] would put it, and are not always eager to talk politics.[33] As one Parent League member put it, "The way to get a volunteer is to ask, 'Who has a drill bit and can drill eight holes in this board next Saturday?' Someone will come who maybe never volunteered before, and then maybe they'll come again." *Beliefs about talk itself were key here* in setting the emotional tone, and in setting the boundaries of the "do-able" – beliefs about who talks, about what talk accomplishes, about where talk belongs, about when talk is "just rhetoric," or dangerous, or depressing, and beliefs about how regular people talk. The intellectual, emotional, and interactional dimensions of cultural work are inseparable.

Getting beyond the uncultural "avoidance of disagreement" explanation, linguistic anthropologists[34] investigate the idea that cultural assumptions about talk itself embody implicit understandings of power,

politics, and selfhood. But they usually treat these talk-cultures as customary, traditional, time-honored, habitual responses to particular local histories in longstanding communities. How do citizens establish cultures of talk in a multicultural, transient, potentially global polity, in which citizens often do not even think that they know what is going on, who is in charge, how to act in a diverse setting, where the power is, or what kind of power it is? In an area like the one described here, we can more clearly hear how different groups can variously interpret, reproduce, and challenge, the "same" institutional, political field, thus more clearly specifying the work of political culture itself.

And so, we are back to the question of power, that started this round robin of explanations: part of why volunteers assumed they were power-less was that they assumed that citizens' talk was "just rhetoric," not a source of power. With a new reckoning of the value of talk itself would have come a new source of power.

Two comparisons

Activists: Everything is close to home and possibly do-able and talking will help make more things do able.

The activists represent another among many possible different orien-tations toward *power*, toward *emotions*, and toward *talk itself*.

Power: Like volunteers, activists also had to talk themselves into hope-fulness despite feeling powerlessness. They did it differently. When I presented my list of local groups in which I participated (including the anti-drugs group), asking interviewees whether they could imagine getting involved in any of them, activists all ended up saying that drugs were indeed a problem, but only after telling themselves that the govern-ment was partly responsible for the drug problem. Although volunteers had to convince themselves that a problem was "not political" in order to care about it, activists had to convince themselves that a problem *was* political in order to care.

> Eleanor (on whether homelessness is a do-able – since activists did not focus in interviews on whether issues were "close to home" and "do-able," I began to ask them about it near the end of interviews, trying to find out why all volunteers and no activists routinely used these phrases): Sure it is. We can pressure our county supervisors, we can pressure the state legislators, we can pressure the U.S. government – after all, we are the government. And we can

> [she pauses] again, we can make a difference with individual people. When you see kids who don't have a home address in your classroom, and you know damn well they're living in a car, that's hard. That's unbelievably hard. And there should be some kind of program, local program, for developing housing. Some kind of low income housing.

In contrast, all of the volunteers said that the way citizens can work on the homelessness issue is by donating time to a homeless shelter or soup kitchen – volunteering with a group. Whether the problem was illiteracy, pollution, homelessness, poverty, lack of child care, disability, or poor schools, volunteers' solution was to think about taking time out of their busy days, to donate an hour or two a day. And some other people interviewed in the larger study, who were not engaged in community affairs at all, pondered offering a homeless person a couch in their apartments, or giving homeless people spare change – one-on-one care.

For activists, a problem could thus be both very personal and "close to home" and *also* "big" and political. For volunteers, calling something personal was a way of making it seem smaller and more "do-able"; for activists, in contrast, ferreting out a problem's institutional origins did not make it less personal, as it did for the volunteers, but *did* make it feel more "do-able." They expanded from personal feelings to structural solutions, instead of treating the personal and political as opposites.

Emotions: Activists tried to organize their sentiments in ways that opened up room for political change; even so, the interviews with activists all gave me the dizzying feeling of perching on the edge of despair. There were too many issues, some overwhelming, all demanding attention. On the topic of nuclear war, one activist said it was a personal issue, that "we have enough bombs to end the world a hundred times over," but that to change it would mean changing "the whole international military establishment." Addressing the same question, Eleanor declared, "Absolutely, that's as close to home as anything. Sure it hits close to home. My word! And I think we have to do something. I think we have to take action, we have to do something." A third activist said, "It scares the hell out of me, It really does," but then concluded, "I'm not saying we should just lay down and get screwed, but what can a local group do?" and she turned to her activist friend in this group interview, repeating the question. There was no reliable method for sifting some issues out of conversation, as there was for the volunteers, so that by the end of each exhausting interview, activists ended up sounding very concerned about nearly all issues.

Maryellen, for example, began by scornfully dismissing anti-drugs groups. But when I said that the anti-drugs group I was studying thought the issue was "central," and "an emergency" (I always presented the various other groups' ideas to interviewees, asking for their interpretation of those citizens' positions), she started to talk about how the government itself had peddled heroin in ghettoes in the 1960s, and said that outlawing marijuana drives people to more dangerous drugs. She had thus reframed it as a political problem, so that by the time I asked her if drugs was a "do-able" issue, she was arguing in favor of antidrugs activism, and then becoming overwhelmed by the problem:

> Maybe a really grassroots type of thing will snap the government into shape. All the power to these grassroots organizations that are trying to do it. And, "may they find an answer." I hope so. I'm sure they do have a point of view. But I don't think the government's gonna help them until they really push hard. I think it's gonna be a real struggle for them to straighten it out.... It depends how far up they go. Maybe if they have a very local thing – and we all have to start local [describes an anti-drugs educational program in her daughter's fifth grade class]. But they don't have money to continue it past fifth grade. But someone in fifth grade isn't going to remember these things as they get older.

> But (summarizing her position on drugs), I don't know, I really feel as if the whole society to me is falling apart... It's gonna take a lot of strength and it's gonna take a lot of people to pull out.

Still, activists had faith in talk itself, as the centerpiece of democracy, even if it could dredge up overwhelming problems.

Talk: Like volunteers, activists sounded less public-spirited when speaking in public than in private, and their language-switching from one context to the next was even more extreme. For example, behind the scenes – and as the group developed, in meetings as well – members talked about government policies regarding toxic waste, but at demonstrations and other public arenas, they used the same "close to home" language that volunteers used. Someone who heard only their public speech might assume that activists simply lacked the "language of solidarity," but in fact, they spoke it quite fluently behind the scenes, and just lost some of their fluency in more public contexts. This changed somewhat as the group developed.

In their first year as a group, the activists treated meetings the same way volunteers did; because there was nothing to do in meetings but talk, activists did not, at first, consider holding meetings to be a form

of action itself. At the beginning of their group's existence, they rarely held meetings or spoke out publicly. Initially, that is, they shared the volunteers' style of citizenship: as one volunteer put it, discussing her lack of interest in "politics," "there is little to do.... What would I do? You could write the *letter*, but otherwise I wouldn't know what to do."

But after a year of meeting publicly only at state-sponsored events, activists decided that holding their own meetings with their own self-generated public discussion was itself a form of action. They eventually decided that there *is* little to do *except* talk, so that when I asked one activist the survey question, "How much influence do you think a person like you can have over government decisions?" she answered with a laugh: "A *lot*, if I get committed to running my mouth!" And this new style of cultural work helped them notice, and cultivate, a different set of organizations on the political horizons, such as international environmental organizations that, in turn, provided eager ears for activists' publicly-minded political talk. Activists developed simultaneously a different orientation to talk itself from volunteers, different feelings, and different kinds of power.[35]

Cynics: Everything is close to home and nothing is do-able, but talking offers us cynical solidarity.

A third group shows another way of mingling these three intertwined assumptions about citizens' power, about the value of talk itself, and about what kinds of feelings good citizenship requires. This subgroup of participants at the country-western dance club (they sat together, often came and went together, and were friends) made constant, morbid, cynical jokes about the world. For example, when the dance club's teacher offered a chance to enter a contest for a cruise to Alaska after the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the cynics were full of giggles:

> Maureen elbowed Hank: Hey, it's a really great time to go to Alaska, now. Right, Bubba? [a "bubba" is a dumb country hick – President Clinton tried to call himself a bubba for a while, to sound like "just folks" – NE]
>
> Hank: You bet. Come take pictures of the oil slick.
>
> Maureen: Be part of history – you can say to your grandkids, "I was there when Alaska was destroyed so that Exxon could make a profit."
>
> Hank: Miles of black beach.

Tino: Take home a souvenir dead sea otter.

Maureen: Take home the last of its kind – the last living sea otter.

Tim: I read that the ship there is still leaking. They cleaned up one beach and then the wind shifted and blew all the oil right back onto it.

Any seemingly innocuous topic of conversation was fodder for cynical jokes. When the topic was fishing, the cynics joked about "acid rain pickling the fish even before you catch it." When I remarked, in the car one day, that some light green hills we passed were pretty, they joked that there were toxic chemicals buried in them because they were near a big refinery, and joked about the toxic workers buried underneath, the toxic cows that would yield toxic t-bone after grazing on those hills, and more. Similarly, they would memorize entire country-western songs and sing them while simultaneously making fun of the sexist lyrics. Whether they joked about local refinery fires, local industrial explosions, acid rain, extinct otters, toxic t-bone, or the drug war, they were protecting themselves from being taken in, and reassuring each other that they still had not become bubbas and that there still are people in the world who are not as gullible as they imagine others to be. Eternal, relentless vigilence was the price of freedom.

"Talking too much" did not present the risk for them that it presented for the volunteers. Instead, they wanted to convince each other that there still were people who were not fooled, were not "bubbas" like the rest of the country-westerners. They wanted it all exposed, all the bad laid out and enumerated and catalogued. Thus, they could show that they were not lacking in knowledge, as they assumed the other country-westerners were, and were not so naive as to think they had power, as they assumed that volunteers and activists did. Creating this sense of cynical solidarity opened up a free space for airing political complaints; freer, in a way, than the spaces volunteers created.

What the concept of cultural work adds to cultural theory

"Culture" has recently become almost every politicians' and academics' explanation of almost everything, from war to personal cleanliness. How does the concept of cultural work refine prevalent cultural explanations of political engagement and disengagement? Let us examine four of these explanations – first, that people say they do not care about the wider world because they do not have the right beliefs;

second, because they lack the language of connection and solidarity, as Bellah, Swidler, or Wuthnow might argue; third, because they are ignorant; or fourth, because they find the public realm too repellently abstract, bloodless, and unconnected to their daily lives.

1. The focus on "belief" becomes a focus on "The belief in the importance of citizens' conversation in a democratic republic."

Common-sense tells us that to understand citizens' abilities to form political opinions we should examine beliefs, the ideas people carry around inside their heads but maybe never express. Differing uses of the ideal of the democratic republic offer a striking illustration of the interactional, cultural work that beliefs do. Many scholars of American political culture have noted a widespread allegiance to the ideal of a democratic republic,[36] a belief in the principle of responsible, participatory citizenship. The problem is, volunteers, activists, and even cynics all wanted to believe in the possibility of the responsible, informed, concerned citizen, active in his or her community – Tocqueville's good citizen of a democratic republic. But that belief – or more exactly, the desire to believe the belief – meant very different things in these different groups; it even meant different things in any one group or for any individual from one moment to the next.

Sherry, for example, did not have an "ideological" reason for not caring; she did not, for example, simply believe that the appropriate agencies were monitoring food, or that in a free enterprise system, companies that make unhealthful products inevitably go out of business. *No* volunteer unequivocally believed that the political system was really doing fine already. None said, "really it's fine, oil spills are necessary elements in an industrial society, and the refineries are doing a fine job," or "we need nuclear battleships to defend ourselves" – except for Ron, who gathered himself up when he said it, puffing out his nostrils, booming the statement in a loud, deep voice across his small living room, making the performance into a big ironic joke. Volunteers wanted to think that they could embody the democratic ideal, but their understanding of the ideal did not include enough talk to live it out in the divided, diverse, conflicted communities that are so much more inextricably enlaced in national and global politics than they were in Tocqueville's day.

For activists, in contrast, the democratic ideal eventually came to mean engaging in often discordant verbal clashes with institutions, and making verbal connections with other activist groups – through newsletters, word of mouth, press conferences, statewide meetings – more than one mentioned global computer networks in interviews with me. "Doing something" meant, above all, talking, writing letters, complaining, making a scene, trying to learn more about the national and international roots that they assumed were under many local problems. Being a good citizen meant voicing criticism. They assumed that citizens' talk mattered. Perhaps the activists were Pollyanna-ish to make the assumption that talk mattered, but assuming that talk matters is certainly a step in making it matter, and without that assumption, there can be no participatory democratic politics.

Like the volunteers and the activists, the cynics held a belief in the democratic ideal, and, like the others, they did not believe that the government was living up to it. That was why they were so angry. But unlike the others, who had to protect a fragile, precious feeling of efficacy, cynics had no reason not to vent their frustrated populism fully and loudly. In fact, they had a good reason to express frustration: to show to each other that there was hope because there were still some people left who were not fooled.

The point is, the central difference in the groups' belief in the ideal of responsible citizenship was in what members assume the belief meant for talk itself. Does the belief in responsible citizenship mean citizens should talk to each other? How? Where? This "invitation to talk" is what distinguished most clearly between different forms of political engagement. No one in the groups I studied ever explicitly verbalized these subtle differences in interpretation of the democratic ideal or any other abstract belief, but this question of a group's valuation of talk itself should be at the core of any definition of political belief.

2. The focus on "Language" becomes a focus on "Using the language of close to home to protect a faith in democracy."

Theorists like Robert Bellah, Michael Ignatieff, Alan Wolfe, and Robert Wuthnow shift the ground away from inner attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge, and toward communication, traditions of speech itself, saying that a floating, unspoken mix of motives animates most action, and only a few of those motives crystallize into speech; those tend to be

the motives that can be easily justified by what Ann Swidler calls the "cultural tools"[37] we have at hand. In other words, although common sense tells us that language expresses belief, these approaches say that language shapes belief, just as much as the other way around. This article obviously draws inspiration from that genre, but the volunteers force us to notice what this concept of "language" might miss.

Using an example of an excellent "language"-focussed study, Robert Wuthnow's *Acts of Compassion*[38] shows what the concept of cultural work adds to this approach. Most of the volunteers Wuthnow interviewed explained their own altruistic behavior in terms of self-interest – "I do it because it's fun," or "I get a lot out of it," or "It's a personal growth experience," or "I meet a lot of interesting people" – or in terms of effectiveness – "We accomplish a lot." Wuthnow empathizes with this language, saying that people use it for a range of reasons – wanting to feel effective, wanting to seem ordinary and humble, for example.[39] But still, he wants volunteers proudly to acknowledge to each other, out loud, that their charitable acts, no matter how small, have meaning in themselves for the larger society, apart from how efficiently they accomplish specific tasks. In a good society, the presence of regular, unsaintly, plain citizens caring for their community is important in itself – it is society's way of saying "I love you" to itself – something that is as important to say in a good society as in a good marriage. He says that volunteers diminish the value of their own work if they do not explicitly recognize the importance of that "display," that ritual of compassion, but the language of self-interest obstructs this recognition.[40]

In practice, it was clear that volunteers implicitly knew that the main message of their work was that being good and caring is possible. And clearly, making the message explicit could have strengthened it. But I add something with which Wuthnow would probably agree: volunteers *also* wanted to show that good citizenship is possible. Volunteers wanted to show that their feelings of compassion mattered, and were not just wasted. And they wanted to show not only that *they* cared; they also wanted to show that *everyone* can care, not just exceptionally good people. In practice, they tried to show that good, effective citizenship was possible by narrowing their circle of concern. "Showing care" and "showing good citizenship" contradicted each other; affirming democracy meant curtailing compassion. Or at least it certainly meant curtailing expressions of compassion in public contexts. When it came to compassion, volunteers knew they were on their own, freelancers in a

wider political world that was not out to support their efforts, and they tried to work within that institutional context instead of changing it.

If volunteers and activists consistently sounded more public-spirited in "backstage" contexts, and more self-interested in more public situations, then they did not simply lack the language of civic obligation and solidarity that Bellah, Ignatieff, Wolfe, and Wuthnow describe; they lacked it *only in some situations.* Volunteers lacked the language of solidarity when that language seemed dangerous, when the language of solidarity seemed poised to threaten solidarity itself, when speaking without already possessing the "power at hand" seemed to be "just rhetoric." The language protected a faith in the democratic process, given citizens' intuited powerlessness, their emotion rules, as does their low valuation of public speech itself.

Are people just satisfied with a constricted, unambiguous language? Whan happens to the submerged languages, the hemmed-in curiosity about the wider world, the inexpressable desires, unanswered questions, unspeakable worries? Ignatieff's answer is strong: "Needs which lack a language adequate to their expression do not simply pass out of speech: they may cease to be felt. The generations that have grown up without ever hearing the language of religion may not feel the slightest glimmer of a religious need."[41] But the volunteers were fixated on the unspeakable; their drive to make the world make sense was not quenched by the unambivalent language of "close to home"; the thin language barely kept inexpressable curiosity and doubt in order. Curiosity and worry kept popping out. The language was necessary partly *because* of what it covered up.[42]

All of these groups were trying to show, in practice, how responsible citizenship can be possible in an imperfect world. The "cultural tools" don't just animate the person; people creatively try to make sense of the world, doing things with the tools that no one could have dreamed the tools could do without observing them in practice. Introducing these questions about power and interaction to the concept of languages shows how the language of "close to home" was a creative effort at meaning-making that made drastically different kinds of sense in different contexts, within the web of mutually implicated, intertwined feelings of powerlessness, emotion rules, and folk theories of language.

3. Motivated ignorance

If the key to the mystery of "close to home" is not deformed "beliefs," or absent "languages," perhaps ignorance explains it. Americans are astoundingly ignorant of the most basic historical and political facts – who the vice-president is, which sides we are arming in various wars, and more.[43] Given this dismal state of affairs, many researchers conclude that a large portion of the American electorate is just too uneducated, stupid, or apathetic to participate. But, again, as Habermas, Mill, and other democratic theorists would argue, memorized lists of facts do not reveal or create political competence; what *could* begin to create competence is unobstructed communication that broadens citizens' political imaginations, inspires curiosity and analysis. Ignorance is not just a cause, or precondition, of other kinds of political competence; it is also an effect of this incompetence-inducing cultural work. In Simonds's model,[44] the three levels of competence – understanding of "what is," "what ought to be," and "what would be possible" – stack up, each presupposing the one below it. But here, volunteers' "incompetence" in the second and third level *drowned out* competence in the first; volunteers' desire to appear optimistic about the future silenced their ability to analyze the present – a thin optimism of the will drowned out a pessimism of the intellect (to paraphrase Gramsci). This becomes especially clear if we listen to changes in speech from one context to the next. Displays of ignorance were not equally urgent in all contexts.

For example, in one interview with a wife and husband, the husband, Ron, eagerly displayed scary knowledge to his wife, Clara. But when he turned to me, his knowledge and critique vanished; instead he sounded gullible and ignorant. The interchange began when I asked Clara about the nuclear issue. She responded that a nuclear battleship was different from a nuclear plant, and safer. Ron interrupted, "A nuclear battleship *is* a nuclear plant."

She said she heard there were differences and again Ron interrupted, "If one of those babies melts down out there in the Sound, there won't be any difference to you!" To *her*, he detailed how a meltdown could happen, drawing on the large store of unspoken fearful knowledge many people in town shared. Clara then said that they may already have been exposed to radioactivity and would not even know it, since the government would not tell residents. Their twelve year old son, also in the room, silently listening to the interview, mumbled, "They wouldn't?"[45]

Then I turned to Ron himself, to ask him about the nuclear issue. Suddenly, he sounded very different. He knew "some sharp people who work on the battleships" and trusted them not to make mistakes.

> So I know accidents happen. They's why there're accidents. But you know, I could stay in my bed, and not cross the street and never get run over by a car, but never do anything.... I don't worry about it. I don't worry about it.... If the people out there were a bunch of Bozos and they worried me, maybe I'd be over there protesting.... I think it's run *pretty* right, so it's not an issue. So I don't do anything about it.

But a moment later Clara said again that she had heard that they cannot melt down, and again, Ron interrupted, "They told you Three Mile Island wouldn't melt down either, but it did." Addressing his wife, Ron wanted to display his knowledge and scare her, but when standing on ceremony, addressing a researcher, he wanted to avoid appearing worried about something he could not change, so he roped his knowledge in, with a happy summary. Here was another setting – in addition to volunteer group meetings – in which a volunteer could let his or her competence roam in one speech context but not another. In volunteer group meetings, "close to home" cheered volunteers up, but made them less able publicly to formulate a moral ideal (of "what ought to be") and less able publicly to imagine a better world (of "what could be"); less able to learn about the wider world together: in short, rendered them less politically competent than they might have been in some other context where hope was less crucial, where displaying and acquiring knowledge would not risk undermining hope. Cultivating these infinite, acutely context-sensitive varieties of apparent "incompetence" took great skill.

4. Coerced privatism in the broader milieu

Some recent discussions of the broader cultural milieu defend privatism by saying that official definitions of "public" debate make the public arena too dry, abstract, and stuffy for the average person. One argument contends that prosperous, post-World War II Americans have typically been *content* just to be left alone, sit in their backyards, play with their kids, and mind their own business, trying to carve out a small space for themselves where they feel free, equal, and comfortable. Richard Flacks, for example,[46] contends that much political activism in this century, such as the struggle for the two-day weekend, has been aimed at maintaining and enlarging that nice little walled

garden, and that intellectuals are fooling themselves if they imagine that the majority of people will ever want to leave that privacy to "make history" instead of "making life": making history is just too hard.

But this privatism takes its own toll, it has not just been the unobstructed will of the people, and it is not just human nature; corporate and government policies *chased* Americans into that little private space, encouraging a trade-off, offering long work hours for high pay if they refrained from mounting big challenges to that system – commanding them, "Don't *ever* leave that tiny little private space!"[47] Volunteers show how hard it is to stay inside the garden wall; they were very aware that their private lives were interlaced with social problems, and they knew there was no wall strong or high enough to keep social ills out. Trying to relax in that green yard meant, among other things, devoting themselves constantly to patching and rebuilding the wall. The wall was the major focus of active inattention. Since engagement with the wider world was inevitable, inattention inevitably had a shape. Protecting what is "close to home" is fine in itself; the problem arises if citizens can never publicly acknowledge that they take anything else seriously, or acknowledge that close and far are inseparable.

Confessional public participation of the sort displayed on talk TV is another example of this uneasy coerced privatism. Linda Nicholson, Joshua Gamson, Sonia Livingstone, and others[48] are quite enthusiastic about confessional talk TV shows like Oprah, saying that the airing of once-private woes in public arenas actually redraws the contours of "the public," by making the unspeakable speakable, by letting new identities and new topics and new kinds of knowledge burst into the public realm. These scholars say that talk TV grasps just how the smallest, seemingly quirky issues can really matter to real people; it captures something real about life that boring universalism, elite science, and stuffy debate never grasped.

In the suburban city portrayed here, a confessional style had local advocates, too. Social service workers invited volunteers and their kids to cloistered events where participants were called upon to talk about themselves a lot, in very personal terms. Unlike the usual volunteer approach, this therapeutic participation *did* value talk itself, but only talk about personal feelings, and only in special rooms, with specially selected people. Political talk in public was still taboo. Social service workers invited volunteers to help maintain groups for drug addicts and "at risk" youth, who could go to a 24 hour a day drop-in center, a

de-tox center, out-patient clinics, and group-oriented courses in "building self-esteem"; anything but a group for healthy, non-addicted adults to speak publicly about wider concerns and anxieties.[49]

The problem is that, however open it claims to be, confessional talk TV, like therapeutic volunteering, coercively enforces only one *style* of speech: if talk show guests voice concern about the wider world, audiences chastise them for not really being truly authentic; speakers' circle of concern is allowed to extend only as far as their own skins. One could easily imagine a talk show guest *thinking* about a study he or she read but feeling compelled to *speak* about it as if it were a personal experience: saying "This happens to me or someone I know," instead of "I read this"; saying "This affects me personally," instead of "I care about someone across the globe, and morality depends on knowing what is happening to other people – to be good you have to think."

This style dovetails nicely with the usual, practical, no-nonsense volunteer style. Both funnel potential empathy and broad curiosity into small, private expressions of direct experience. Both imagine an impenetrable boundary between inner and outer, close and far, personal and irrelevant, authentic and inauthentic, action and thought – for volunteers, the wall is "the local"; for confessional TV, it is the skin. Both enforce a relentlessly small circle of concern, and outlaw reflection about the common good in public. Volunteers are called upon to lend a hand, therapeutic citizens to lend a heart; still missing from both styles is a thinking, moral soul that is loyally connected to a wider world.[50]

The irony in the United States is that while community-minded volunteers, empathetic social service workers, and debate-oriented "humanists" try hard to avoid talking about the common good, free marketeers and religious fundamentalists use the languate of obligation, solidarity, and the common good to advocate private schooling, private health care, private charity instead of welfare. Much moral, political discussion that reaches wide public circulation devalues talk itself, and forbids ambivalence and self-questioning – Rush Limbaugh and his "dittoheads," as they proudly call themselves, or the trying-hard-to-be-uncritical followers of various "fundamentalisms,"[51] or political candidates who proclaim their commitment to deeds, not words – as if efforts to make decision-making itself more democratic are irrelevant to "getting the job done," and as if there is always already only one right answer. When the public spirit evaporates from so many others'

public discourse, these are the loudest "public-spirited" voices left in public: the voices that call for citizens to abandon public decision-making and abandon public self-reflection (and abandon the common good as well).

To an outside observer, volunteers *could* have appeared equally willing to abandon the common good. Drawing out their effortful cultural work, however, shows that the self-interested voice is not just "the voice of the people," but *is* the voice that people like the volunteers feel they must use in public, in order to protect citizens' humble, worthy mission. Simply attributing the "close to home" language to undemocratic beliefs, inadequate languages, ignorance, or active rejection of the public realm is not enough.

Conclusion: Power, emotions and politeness in an imperfect world

Taking volunteers' professions of "small-mindedness" at face value would be a mistake. Expressions of political disconnection worked hard; people exerted themselves to keep the wider world at bay. Treating these expressions of apathy – and treating beliefs in general – this way helps specify just what it is *about* beliefs that makes them matter for public life. All along the way, I have entertained possible alternate interpretations of volunteers' use of the "close to home" language: interpretations that highlight power (that they were rational actors; or that a cross-contextual hegemonic process prevented volunteers from noticing problems); emotions or other inner psychic processes (that volunteers were avoiding cognitive dissonance or numbing their feelings); and culturally patterned interactional styles (that volunteers feared voicing anxiety, ambivalence, getting angry, or asking questions in public because of their low valuation of public talk itself). These "structural," "psychological," and "cultural" levels of analysis do not correspond to their separate objects of study ("the structure," "the individual," and "the cultural institutions") but rather, are mutually implicated and inextricable.[52] All of these explanations call forth something that the others offer; each fills in what others leave uncharted, each layer is contingent on the others.

Understanding the tortured, twisted use of "close to home" helps show how these explanations are connected; the interconnections could help us interpret other public languages, as well. What if the things we call "beliefs" are always so equivocal? Then hope and hopelessness, apathy

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and engagement would not seem so far apart; they would always be intertwined, actively making sense of a world that doesn't.

By showing how hard this apparent apathy is to produce, the concept of cultural work reveals the kernel of political hope embedded in volunteers' strenuous expressions of self-interest and political disengagement. At the same time that it leaves more room for hope than other approaches, the idea of cultural work seriously acknowledges people's sense of political powerlessness. While politicians all over the globe extoll the virtues of voluntary associations like the ones portrayed here – treating them as a panacea for all social ills, from lack of trust, to crime, to poverty, to economic inefficiency – this article shows how hidden obstructions to citizens' communication can fuel this prevalent language of political disconnection.

In an imperfect world, each of the three groups described here responded dexterously and creatively to powerlessness; each groups' response lacked different aspects of the democratic ideal. *But all retained some aspect of it.* I can put this even more strongly: the effort at retaining some aspect of it *included* an implicit recognition of its failings. The effort at retaining a faith that the world makes sense, is just and democratic, included acknowledgment of the ways in which the world does not make sense, is not just, not democratic.

The people portrayed here worked hard to appear politically disconnected and self-interested. They did not want to be apathetic and self-interested, but feared that expressing self-interest was the only way to retain faith in the possibility of democracy. Cynics', activists', and volunteers' cultural work opened up different kinds of spaces for publicly-minded political engagement. The point is to draw these openings out; that is what theorists, politicians, journalists, and activists should be doing, instead of just glumly taking citizens' expressions of apathy at their word.

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Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Anchor, 1969 (1831)), J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin, 1979 (1859)), John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1927), Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic citizenship and political community," in Chantal Mouffe, editor, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (New York: Verso, 1992), 74–89.
2. A. P. Simonds, "On being informed," *Theory and Society* 11 (1982): 587–616, 591–592. Another clear statement of this approach comes from Alan Wolfe's analysis of moral discourse, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 245, in which he defines morality not as any particular political ideology or any list of rules that citizens can memorize, but a practice: "[a sociological approach] seeks to clarify the conditions under which individuals can bring their own capacities as moral agents to bear on the decisions they must make."
3. Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic politics today," in Chantal Mouffe, editor *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, 1. As she rightly suggests, maybe "left" never really meant a laundry list, anyway, but always a process.
4. For example: Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Penguin, 1984), Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1993).
5. Jeffrey Alexander, "Analytic debates: Understanding the relative autonomy of culture," in Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–30; Jeffrey Alexander, *Action and its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Nancy Fraser, "What's critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and gender," in *Feminism as Critique*; Iris Young, "Impartiality and the civic public," in *Feminism as Critique*; Seyla Benhabib, "The generalized and the concrete other," in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, editors, *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987).
6. Simonds, "On being informed," 597. My third dimension is a little different from Simonds's. His focusses on citizens' historical knowledge, while mine would fold historical knowledge into citizens' general understanding of the political possibilities for generating power in civil society – for generating communicative power. I think that this amendment actually hews more closely to Simonds's own focus on

interaction than his own typology does; it follows through on his Habermasian insistence on the centrality of investigating communicative obstruction. My second dimension differs from his on similar lines; I focus more on how people enact their vision of "good" in practice. His is more about abstract moral judgments, but, along with feminist theorists, I am not sure how an observer can separate people's judgments about what ought to be from their judgments about what is good in particular interactions, in particular situations. See below for more discussion of his thought–provoking analysis of political ignorance.

7. Gary Alan Fine and Kent Sandstrom, "Ideology in action: A pragmatic approach to a contested concept," *Sociological Theory* 11/1 (1993): 21–37. The difference between my typology and theirs is that I found it impossible to separate the inter-actional properties of "emotions" from "dramaturgy," so I put part of what they call "dramaturgy" in the "emotions" category and part in the "relation to talk" category. I also highlight the question of how people value talk itself more than they do. In addition, Fine and Sandstrom do not say that what they call "relations in and between groups" could lead to a sense of how "macro" institutions enter into the "micro" themes. I think that by using the work of Aaron Cicourel, Harvey Sacks, or Harold Garfinkel, for example, we can stay within a meaning-making framework and still show how micro incorporates and produces macro in everyday speech.

8. In *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), Haber-mas tried to outline four categories into which all interaction falls – normative, dramaturgical, conversation, and instrumental. But again, this division obscures precisely what is most interesting. Nancy Fraser (in "What's critical about critical theory?") makes a similar point about Habermas's division between public and private – it leaves out the most interesting questions of all: Where do we draw the line between them? How does it change over time?

9. I have changed names of people, places, and corporations, and some distinctive featurs of the setting, to protect the anonymity of the people portrayed.

10. Another interviewee said, "What am I gonna do – burn it down?"

11. Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

12. Tocqueville's example of American's zest for forming funny little groups is a Temperance Union – perhaps not much has changed since that and my anti-drugs groups.

13. The larger study uses, and modifies, the "extended case method" (as Michael Burawoy outlines in his introduction and conclusion to *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis,* by Michael Burawoy, Alice Bur-ton, Ann Ferguson, Kathryn Fox, Joshua Gamson, Nadine Gartell, Leslie Hurst, Charles Kurzman, Leslie Salzinger, Josepha Schiffman, Shiori Ui, (Berkeley: Uni-versity of California Press, 1991)), expanding from micro to macro and back again, by examining the groups' relations to media, government, and corporate agencies and using this expansion to revise theories of participatory democracy.

14. The larger study focusses on comparing different ways of talking in different contexts; in contrast, the examples in this article come primarily from interviews, not participant-observation. Using interview material to study language is prob-lematic, I think, since interviewers can never quite be sure which of their plural roles interviewees are in when answering questions – which "hat" the interviewees are wearing, as Stephen Hart puts it in *What Does the Lord Require?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). However, in this article, I show how members' ways of talking in interview contexts help make sense of the groups' ways of talking

in everyday-life contexts. That is, by observing how they talk in and out of group meetings, and by purposely interviewing them explicitly in their capacity *as members* of the groups in which I observed them, I could be fairly sure that I knew which hat they were wearing.

15. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

16. Of course, the classic statement of this approach is Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971 (1965)). I do not wish to address the entire, enormously complex body of rational-choice theories here. In focussing on interaction and talk, I am working on a different, perhaps complementary, level of analysis.

17. This argument echoes one made by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

18. While some rational choice theorists want to expand rational self-interest to account for all human behavior (to say, for example, that altruists are actually "interested" in attaining a "warm glow," by donating to charity or helping sick puppies, or attaining the feeling that they have fulfilled their duty, by voting), Jane Mansbridge rightly argues, in "The rise and fall of self-interest in the explanation of political life," and "The relation of altruism and self-interest" (both in Jane Mansbridge, editor, *Beyond Self-Interest*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 3–24 and 133–146) that these unbalanced explanations are implausible, and asks us to model more nuanced relationships between rational self-interest and various kinds of altruism. I am showing how one might investigate some of those nuances (how expressions of self-interest can preserve a sense of altruistic duty, for example), and add that the way a group negotiates balance among interests, love, duty, and any other psychic motives, is both cause and effect of the group's interactional style.

19. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 110; see also Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974), John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1980).

20. James Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)) criticizes the idea of hegemony by saying that dominated people know perfectly well that they are dominated and have good ways of communicating their rebellious feelings to each other, behind the backs of their dominators. But he does not apply this idea to western democracies, which he says allow safe, open political opposition. Presumably, citizens here somehow convince themselves either that everything is okay or that, for whatever reason, it is not up to them to change it. For more on Scott's work, see my "Making a fragile public, A talk-centered study of citizenship and power" *Sociological Theory* 14/3 (1996): 262–289, which could be considered a complement to this article: it focusses on theorizing power as the power to create publicly legitimate interactional styles. It relies solely on participant-observational material to ask what kinds of power in civil society voluntary associations can create.

21. Geoff Eley, in "Nations, publics, and political cultures: Placing Habermas in the nineteenth century" (in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 289–339), argues correctly that this is more like what Gramsci meant by hegemony than current uses of the word, which he says tend to collapse it with "dominant ideology," treating it as a way of thinking instead of a practice. See also Nicola Beisel's article, "Constructing a shifting moral boundary: Literature and obscenity in nineteenth century America" in Michele Lamont

and Marcel Fournier, editors, *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 107, on the importance of making the "how" connection clearer.

22. In fact, her focus on it helped me decide to limit my study to that neck of the bay, even though it meant ignoring a month's worth of my fieldwork notes from another area.

23. Certainly, investigation on the level of the individual psyche is important, but not my project. And the two levels of investigation are not mutually exclusive: one could extend the idea of psychic numbing, for example, to discuss interaction. Thus, in *No Reason to Talk About It: Families Confront the Nuclear Taboo* (New York: Norton, 1987), David Greenwald and Steven Zeitlin recorded many families strenuously shunning discussion of the issue; parents did not want to scare their kids, and held out the hope that their kids were oblivious. Kids did not want to force their parents to admit their inability to protect them, because the kids did not want to make the parents feel sad and impotent. The researchers found that talk itself, almost regardless of the content, helped reassure children, by letting them know that they were not alone in their fears.

24. Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

25. Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1968).

26. Joanna Rogers Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983).

27. Arlie Hochschild, "Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85/3 (1979): 551–575. Harry Frankfurt makes a similar point, when he says that the essence of human desire is that it is not just raw appetite, but culturally, morally determined "desires about desires" [as Albert Hirschman summarizes in *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982]. See also Amartya Sen's "Rational fools: A critique of the behavioral foundations of economic theory" in Jane Mansbridge, editor, *Beyond Self-Interest*, 25–43, 39.

28. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964); see also Dewey's *Public and Its Problems*. Michael Billig calls this "the spirit of contradiction," in *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

29. Patricia Wasielewski, "Emotion as a resource" (paper given at American Sociological Association meetings, San Francisco, 1989).

30. See, for example, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1985).

31. See Elihu Katz, "Publicity and pluralistic ignorance: Notes on the spiral of silence, in D. Whitney and Ellen Wartella, editors, *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* (Beverly Hills, California Sage, 1988), 89–99, for a good argument against Noelle-Neumann, that focusses on the nature of the context in which disagreement occurs; see also Robert Wyatt and Tamar Liebes's ongoing cross-cultural study of political debate, "Where and how people don't talk about politics" (paper given at Annenberg Scholars Conference on Public Space, University of Pennsylvania, 1995).

32. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

33. Daniel Rodgers, *Contested Meanings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

34. For example, Gerry Philipsen, *Speaking Culturally* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1992), Shirley Brice Health, *Ways With Words* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Keith Basso, *Portraits of "Whiteman"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979).

35. Class differences are often invoked to explain differences in different people's valuations of their own political talk and ideas (for some examples, see Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control, Volume 1* (NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1973), David Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)). A class argument would say that people who do not have the opportunity to practice decision-making at work feel unauthorized to make decisions in politics as well. It would ask whether volunteers and activists came to the groups already with certain orientations toward political involvement, or even, as Bernstein argues, toward talk itself. Although this kind of argument is clearly worthwhile, class differences will not explain the differences between volunteers and activists; I could not have chosen two more equally matched groups. Volunteers and activists could have paired off, Noah's Ark-style: two corporate chemists, two corporate computer technicians, two moderately successful local realtors, four schoolteachers, four office workers, etc. Education levels matched as well. Cynics were similar, as well. In these groups, occupation, education and political attitudes were *mutually* implicated: one cynic, for example, had been a schoolteacher for a year but had quit because she did not believe in controlling children the way schools required. One activist was a corporate chemist who had sought, and found work in a company he considered socially responsible. In contrast, a volunteer who was a corporate chemist worked for a pesticide company and exerted an enormous amount of emotional effort convincing himself that his work was not immoral. Political orientations helped steer people toward jobs that they then had to justify or quit.

36. For some examples, see Robert Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Jeffrey Weintraub, *Freedom and Community: The Republican Virtue Tradition and the Sociology of Liberty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming); Jennifer Hochschild, *What's Fair?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); David Halle, *America's Working Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).

37. Ann Swidler, "Culture in action" *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1985): 273–286); in "Situated action and vocabularies of motive," C. Wright Mills calls a similar concept "vocabularies of motive" (in Irving Horowitz, editor, *Power, Politics, and People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979 (1940)); Wuthnow, Bellah, Wolfe, and Ignatieff all call a similar idea "language."

38. Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion.*

39. In his theoretical work, I think he would outlaw this type of speculation about citizens' efforts at making meaning. But his empirical work demonstrates beautifully that he is not as "tone-deaf" to meaning as he perhaps thinks he *should* be, or as Jeffrey Alexander accuses him of being (in "Toward a strong program in the sociology of culture," delivered at ASA meeting, Washington, D.C., 1995).

40. Wolfe makes a similar point in *Whose Keeper?*, 102: the "moral code" of the market [that highlights self-interests] fails to give moral credit to those [who make sacrifices] ... the market leaves us no way to appreciate disinterest."

41. Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 138.

42. This point illustrates Jeffrey Alexander's critique of Swidler's work; he says that she

simply reverses the standard causality – saying that action causes values, instead of the other way around (Alexander, *Action and Its Environments*, 329). I am saying that neither "values" nor "action" come first. Rather, as anthropologist John Gumperz argues in "Contextualization and understanding," *Berkeley Cognitive Science Report: Institute of Cognitive Studies* 59 (1989): "the processes through which cultural and other types of background knowledge are brought into the interpretive processes" work simultaneously as tools and values, processes and products.

43. Much of this vast literature is summarized in W. Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

44. Simonds, "On being informed."

45. I did not interview him, but was it right of me even to have allowed him to stay in the room? Who would have guessed that his own parents would so graphically describe grave dangers without devoting the least amount of effort to reassuring him or letting him voice his concerns? They assumed he was too young to care.

46. For example, Richard Flacks, *Making History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), Herbert Gans, *Middle American Individualism* (New York: Free Press, 1988). Similarly, though more rationalistically, Neuman (*Paradox of Mass Politics*) makes the argument that Americans are ignorant about politics because they do not want to bestir themselves to acquire information when the problem does not directly affect them.

47. In *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) Juliet Schor argues that this coerced quest for private life paradoxically ended up eroding family time, as workers gave up struggling for shorter hours and focussed instead on higher pay that left them little time for anything but work. Historically, I add, free time has been considered a precondition for citizens' political participation; it wasn't just private life that suffered when the working day expanded.

48. Linda Nicholson, "Emotions and the public sphere of postmodernism" (talk given at Political Theory Colloquium, University of Wisconsin, Madison, March, 1996); Joshua Gamson, "Do ask, do tell: Freak talk on TV" *The American Prospect* Fall/ 23 (1995): 44–51; Sonia Livingstone, *Talk on Television: Critical Reception, Expertise, Public Debate and the Audience Discussion Programme* (London: Routledge, 1994); see also Paolo Carpignano, Robin Andersen, Stanley Aronowitz, and William DiFazio, "Chatter in the age of electronic reproduction: Talk television and the 'public mind'" (in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Bruce Robbins, editor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 93–120).

49. This stands in dramatic contrast to the activist strand of social-service work sometimes found in many other countries, and in the American past as well.

50. In *The Search for Political Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Paul Lichterman argues that for U.S. Green activists, the ability to value personal, emotional expression, plus a high valuation of the power of talk, plus long horizons in time and space, equalled a kind of individualistic universalism. His argument thus resonates with Durkheim who says that individualistic self-reflection is not necessarily small-minded.

51. Anthony Giddens, "Risk, trust, reflexivity," in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, editors, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 184–197. Giddens's formulation of fundamentalisms underscores the point I am trying to make in this article: even groups that claim to be "traditional" have to do culture work to *convince* themselves that they are simply adhering to a tradition that they *wish* they could just take for granted.

52. Jeffrey Alexander, "Analytic debates," in *Action and its Environments*, and Alexander and Philip Smith, in "The discourse of American civil society: A new proposal for cultural studies," in *Theory and Society* 22/2 (1993): 151–207. Where I differ from Alexander is in my treatment of the "cultural" moment of analysis. He analyzes culture as deeply traditional "codes," symbols, binary oppositions, but does not treat culturally the ways the codes are enacted in everyday speech (see Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman, "The practice of meaning in civil society," presented at American Sociological Association meeting, 1996). I am showing just how culturally patterned the enactment itself is, showing that implicit cultural definitions of "what talk itself is" and how it infuses the "deeper" culture structures he discusses.