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Building an Open Qualitative Science

Part II

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Building an Open Qualitative Science, Part II

ISSUE EDITORS

Kathryn J. Edin, Corey D. Fields, David B. Grusky, Jure Leskovec, Marybeth J. Mattingly, Kristen Olson, and Charles Varner

CONTENTS

Listening to the Voices of America

KATHRYN J. EDIN, COREY D. FIELDS, DAVID B. GRUSKY, JURE LESKOVEC, MARYBETH J. MATTINGLY, KRISTEN OLSON, AND CHARLES VARNER

We make the case for building a permanent public-use platform for conducting and analyzing immersive interviews on the everyday lives of Americans. The American Voices Project (AVP)—a widely watched experiment with this new platform—provides important early evidence on its promise. The articles in this issue reveal that, although public-use interview datasets obviously cannot meet all research needs, they do provide new opportunities to study small or hidden populations, new or emerging social problems, reactions to ongoing social crises, submerged values and attitudes, and many other aspects of American life. We conclude that a permanent AVP platform would help build an "open science" form of qualitative research that complements—rather than replaces—the existing very important body of immersive-interviewing research.

Keywords: qualitative, immersive, open science

At the height of the 2008 financial crisis, Queen Elizabeth II asked, "Why did nobody see it coming?" When economist Paul Krugman delivered an address in Lisbon four years later, he owned up to the failure and placed the blame squarely on his discipline. Economists, he asserted, should be "ashamed of their profession" because it had failed to predict, much less coherently explain, one of the key crises of our time—the Great Recession (Krugman 2012).

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This was no small failure. The unemployment rate doubled between December 2007 and October 2009; one-fourth of American families lost at least 75 percent of their wealth over the first four years of the recession; and approximately ten million American households lost their homes over the recession's full course (Pfeffer, Danziger, and Schoeni 2013). "Times of crisis are when economists are most needed," Krugman continued. "If they have no useful advice to offer—the whole enterprise of economic scholarship has failed in its most essential duty."[1]

Do sociology and other social sciences have a crisis-prediction record good enough to meet Krugman's very reasonable standard? It would be hard to argue that they do. In many respects, the story of the twenty-first century is a story of cascading social crises, few of which have been successfully predicted, well monitored, or well understood. As Richard Bookstaber (2023) recently put it, we're entering a new epoch of social crises, a "slow-motion tidal wave of risks" that may even pose an "existential threat to civilization." In a recent *Global Risks Report* (World Economic Forum 2022), 20 percent of surveyed elites expected to see "tipping points," "persistent crisis," and "catastrophic outcomes" in the next decade, a steep increase relative to earlier assessments. Because these crises are often social—as much as economic—in structure, it is important to apply Krugman's challenge more broadly to the social sciences as a whole.

When a broader census of social crises is taken, it quickly becomes clear that there is ample failure to go around, failure that has taken the form of ignoring or dismissing warning signs or underinvesting in relevant monitoring activities. The rise of political extremism—which has reinvigorated White supremacist ideologies, polarized civil society, challenged democratic forms of governance, and eroded trust in many institutions—was largely unpredicted and unanticipated and not well monitored until it was fully upon us. The social effects of the ongoing takeoff in natural disasters are also poorly understood. Across the nation, communities have seen a rapid acceleration of weather-related disasters (costing the economy $165 billion in 2022 alone), yet our capacity to monitor the social fallout from these crises is not well developed (National Centers for Environmental Information 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far caused more than 1.3 million excess deaths in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023b), revealed that critical real-time or near-time health and economic data were often unavailable, with the result that a host of new monitoring instruments had to be built on the fly (for example, Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey, Kaiser Family Foundation COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor). The ongoing opioid epidemic has now claimed nearly a million lives, but social scientists only detected it well after the carnage began more than two decades ago (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023a). The ongoing sharpening of geopolitical tensions and Cold War sensibilities has brought on a sharp rise in apocalyptic worldviews, an emerging crisis that has been largely ignored, barely monitored, and remains poorly understood (Davis 2022). A historic decline in fertility—which has left the United States with its lowest total fertility rate ever recorded—is yet another unanticipated and poorly understood crisis (Hamilton 2021). The "loneliness and mental health crisis," which predated the pandemic but accelerated in tandem with it, was likewise in play long before it was diagnosed (Demarinis 2020; Twenge et al. 2021). And, finally, after decades of decline, we've seen a dramatic surge in homicide rates in 2020 and then a gradual decline thereafter (with 2023 rates still above pre-pandemic levels), a development that was not predicted and has triggered a sharp social and political fallout that continues to play out (Arango 2023).

Are we asking too much of social science? We don't think so. Although even the most effective monitoring system may not have predicted the opioid epidemic, it should at least have been able to detect signs that a crisis of this kind was likely to emerge, especially in parts of the country (such as Appalachia) suffering from rising anomie and an epidemic of

1. "Crises," he emphasized, "are times when economics and economists can and should really prove their worth" (Krugman 2012).

pain. As Paul Krugman said of the Great Recession, "Nobody could realistically have demanded that the economics profession predict that Lehman Brothers would go down on September 15, 2008, and take much of the world economy with it" (2012). But Krugman goes on to note that "What you can criticize economists for . . . is failing even to see that something like this crisis was a fairly likely event" (2012). Even by this relaxed standard, sociologists have likewise often fallen short. Although arguably there were many leading indicators of "something like" a rise in political extremism or "something like" a mental health crisis, the field has not been set up with the infrastructure needed to reliably detect these crises and many others.

The foregoing list of crises also makes it clear that the early prediction problem is hardly our only monitoring problem. We also need real-time monitoring of responses and adaptations to known crises and social developments. Even after a crisis is clearly in play, we still want a monitoring system that captures how the most affected people are coping and making sense of the crisis, how those who are more protected and privileged are interpreting it, and the causes lying behind the crisis. If, for example, our monitoring system failed to predict the rise of political extremism, we might still hope that it would at least provide evidence on how extremists make sense of the movement, how those opposed to extremism interpret it, and the social psychological or behavioral precipitants of an extremist worldview (such as perceived threats to social standing among rural Whites).[2] This after-the-fact monitoring function is of course important not just for crises but also for social processes that develop more gradually into major social problems (such as rising income inequality).

No matter which monitoring task we are considering, either "early prediction" or "after-the-fact," it is clear, then, that the social science record is hardly stellar. If Krugman was hard on economists, it is surely appropriate for other social scientists to likewise step up and accept some blame. We have evidently been so busy with our own narrow disciplinary concerns that we have forgotten that—at minimum—it is our job to anticipate, monitor, and interpret the many social crises of our time. Just as Krugman lamented that economics has let us down, so too the social sciences as a whole have often failed in one of their essential duties, that of alerting the nation to the most important crises and social developments. Although there is no guarantee that such alerts will be heeded, a core job of social science is to put the evidence on the table so the general public and policymakers can decide how best to react to it. The response to such warnings may well be one of disinterest or prolonged inaction. Even so, our job—as social scientists—is to expose the problems in a timely way, especially as we move into a new polycrisis period that places a premium on swift information-gathering.

The simple purpose of this introduction is to attempt to make some headway in envisioning how the country's monitoring infrastructure could more successfully deliver on this need. We will start by asking why the existing infrastructure for monitoring has fallen short and then consider what is needed to improve it. To foreshadow our argument, we suggest that we need a permanent immersive-interviewing platform that elicits broad, open-ended conversations founded on openness, trust, and honesty. This new platform, which would supplement existing survey-based monitoring, would make it possible to directly listen to Americans at regular intervals, thereby accessing their interpretations, their sentiments, and their responses to ongoing crises.

The case for setting up such a platform does not rest exclusively on the need to detect new crises and monitor responses to known ones. Although we have stressed to this point the growing importance of crisis monitoring, it is no less important to carry out everyday moni-

2. There are of course many social scientists who have engaged in after-the-fact interpretations of political extremism. See, for example, Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2026); Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016). We are not suggesting that such after-the-fact monitoring does not happen but only that a richer trove of real-time data would assist in carrying out that type of monitoring.

toring of key attitudes and behaviors that evolve under the force of long-standing social and institutional processes (such as rationalization, marketization, individualization, othering) as much as sudden crises. We will show that a public immersive-interviewing platform can meet this need as well by allowing for ongoing real-time analysis of a shared, large-*N*, nationally representative dataset. It goes without saying that this new platform would never replace—but only complement—existing research traditions based on other very valuable research methods (administrative data, surveys, social media, qualitative journalism, and individualized immersive interviewing).

THE EXISTING MONITORING INFRASTRUCTURE

Before describing this new platform in more detail, it is useful to take stock of our extant monitoring system based on surveys and administrative data, social media content, qualitative journalism, and conventional forms of immersive interviewing. Although each of these approaches plays an important and irreplaceable role in our monitoring infrastructure, we will show that none of them ensures that the voices of all Americans are reliably monitored and analyzed in real time.

Real-Time Monitoring via Surveys and Administrative Data

If asked how the pulse of the American people is taken, most people would point to federally funded cross-sectional and panel surveys (such as the General Social Survey [GSS], the Current Population Survey, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the National Health Interview Survey); surveys funded by philanthropic organizations and nonprofits (such as the Pew Research Center and Kaiser Family Foundation surveys); administrative data (such as tax records, educational records, and safety net program data); and key Census Bureau products (such as the decennial census, the American Community Surveys, County Business Patterns, and Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates). These types of surveys and administrative data products are indeed critical for monitoring purposes. We use them to monitor unemployment, poverty, income inequality, educational access, safety net use, incarceration, consumer behavior, health outcomes, social and political attitudes, and much more. Although work is ongoing to improve this infrastructure (via improved data linkage, new survey products, and more), no one would dispute that our constellation of survey and administrative products, when taken together, constitute one of the world's premier quantitative monitoring systems.

But this infrastructure also has its limitations. The capacity to detect what is happening on the ground via surveys and administrative data rests on the assumption that survey designers know which questions to ask; that the items on administrative instruments, which have been designed to meet narrow organizational agendas, can be successfully repurposed for other agendas; that survey takers will consent to participate and that selectivity in providing consent is minimal; that respondents can or will provide accurate responses; that closed-ended responses suffice to capture all that needs to be known; that we have the requisite budget and organizational capacity to add new items frequently, to collect data frequently, and to release it to analysts in real time; and that funders can be convinced that the proposed survey is sufficiently valuable. Because some of these assumptions will not be met (and perhaps never can be), it is hardly surprising that social scientists have often failed to detect crises in a timely way or to lend critical insights into them quickly enough to inform the immediate policy response. The existing infrastructure places impossible demands on survey designers, survey respondents, and repurposed administrative instruments and thus leaves a boatload of dark matter that is simply not amenable to the forced-choice survey, at least not in its current incarnation.

It is possible, to be sure, that we will eventually get better at identifying and incorporating key survey variables and ultimately explain the social world more satisfactorily within the confines of the survey tradition. But that is an exceedingly long-term proposition that will not help us get the job done now. In our crisis-laden century, there is arguably an imperative to improve our monitoring infrastructure in the short term, and it seems unlikely that doubling down on the survey form alone will suffice.

Real-Time Monitoring via Social Media Platforms

This is all to suggest that, insofar as our monitoring relies on the closed-ended survey, we are making a big bet that social scientists are prescient enough to know what types of dark matter should be exposed and thus what questions to ask, seemingly a big ask in a polycrisis environment that could engender relatively rapid changes in sentiments and behaviors. This leads us to ask whether the still-burgeoning stream of social media monitoring can solve this problem. It might be thought, after all, that the open-endedness of platform-based expression (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, X) nicely eliminates the need for the prescient social scientist and thus makes for an increasingly useful monitoring instrument in the twenty-first century.

Given how much time is now spent on social media platforms (Perrin and Atske 2021), no one can dispute the importance of understanding what is happening on them. Although platform-monitoring research is thus immensely useful, it is nonetheless difficult to harness for monitoring trends in everyday attitudes and behaviors. This is because such research can only provide evidence on the highly culled sample that contributes to a particular platform (the selection problem), cannot always distinguish human from nonhuman participation (bots, AI-generated content), can only reveal how the participating subpopulation reacts to the primes embedded in the structure of the platform and the user's idiosyncratic feed (the priming problem), cannot be assumed to reveal the equally important constellation of attitudes and behaviors that are evoked off platforms (the generalization problem), and raises ethical concerns that have not yet been fully resolved for panopticon-style monitoring and many other forms. The selection problem is in fact deeper than it appears because many platform users are mere lurkers who never contribute data and thus engender yet another form of missing data (McClain et al. 2021). The priming problem is also deeply problematic for monitoring because users are exposed to a rapidly changing environment of feeds (with the nature of these changes also differing across users). Although it is possible that one could statistically control for such priming effects, the task is dicey given the very complicated changes in platform environments across users and over time. The generalizability problem refers to an even more fundamental priming effect that is likely insurmountable without substantial side evidence on offline life (Gonzalez-Bailon 2023). The obvious problem here is that we simply cannot know whether online discussions are sufficient without also knowing what is happening offline. These various challenges, taken together, make it difficult to rely exclusively on social media analyses for gauging trends in racial or gender animus, bullying and assault, toxic political beliefs, social isolation and estrangement, meaninglessness and anomie, social deprivation, and all manner of other key attitudes or behaviors.

This is not to deny in any way the importance of monitoring platform behavior. Because many people spend substantial time on social media platforms, we surely need to know what is happening on them. But we also need tools that solve the selectivity problem by listening to the voices of those who are and are not active on platforms, that solve the priming problem by delivering a controlled prime that is tuned for the research purpose at hand, and that solve the generalizability problem by examining offline as well as online behavior. We will show that a public immersive-interviewing platform can make some headway on each of these problems.

Real-Time Monitoring via Qualitative Journalism

The third prong of our monitoring infrastructure—qualitative journalism—has increasingly taken on monitoring functions that surveys or social media can't easily handle. Because social media analyses mainly speak to online behavior, and because survey and administrative data often lack depth and cannot easily be analyzed in real time, qualitative journalism has come to play a critical—if largely unacknowledged—role in our current monitoring infrastructure.

This turn to qualitative journalism was nicely illustrated during the early months of the pandemic. Were people lonely during the early shelter-in-place orders? We turned to journalism to find out (Halpert 2020). What was behind the so-called Great Resignation? We turned to journalism to understand it (Gelles 2022). How were Americans talking about race and racism as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests took hold? We read the immersive interviews that journalists provided to learn more (Issawi 2020). How did essential workers handle the risks that were suddenly thrust upon them? Journalists again gave us the early answers (Ward 2020; Sharp 2020; Greenhouse 2020). In all these cases, social scientists eventually waded in and provided important scholarship, but only after millions of readers—including employers, public intellectuals, politicians, and other leaders—had their views shaped by the early qualitative evidence that only journalism was providing. It is in this critical sense that we already have a real-time monitoring infrastructure that shapes our early policy response. The obvious danger here is that we often act on this information without knowing how accurate it is.

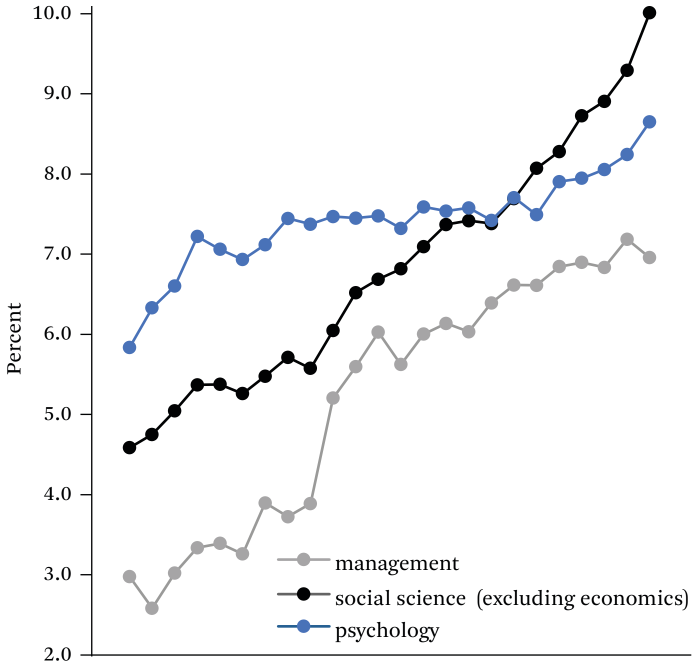
Although the United States has increasingly turned to qualitative journalism for real-time monitoring, it has done so partly because it has nowhere else to turn. It would be hard to argue, after all, that the evidentiary foundation of qualitative journalism (sometimes comprising as few as two to three interviews) is sufficient to the task, a conclusion that should not surprise given that journalism was never set up to meet the evidentiary standards of science. It does not have the infrastructure or funding models that support large-*N* analysis, probability sampling, and that all-critical capacity to sort out competing accounts via sustained secondary analysis. It also does not have the normative guardrails that are fine tuned for scientific objectives. The concept of reproducibility within journalism is, for example, wholly incommensurable with the scientific understanding of that concept. When journalists refer to reproducibility, they are invoking the assurance that, if the specific informants featured in the article were reinterviewed, they would confirm that they were correctly quoted and that the quoted material was consistent with their experiences. This formulation does not deliver the assurances that are needed for high-quality monitoring. If we are to monitor well, the key question is not whether the interviewees were correctly quoted (although obviously that is a necessary condition for good science), but whether they are representative of the group being described and can therefore be used to characterize that group. This scientific concept of reproducibility is hardly an esoteric one. Even everyday readers of qualitative journalism are typically interested in the central tendency and almost certainly treat the provided quotes as representing just that (unless the quoted people are famous and of intrinsic interest in themselves).

This is all to stress that, because journalism is set up to deliver on the journalistic mission and responds to incentives that are not fine-tuned to the needs of science, it cannot necessarily be counted on to deliver fully on the real-time monitoring function. The core job of journalism is to report on current events, to deliver opinions and interpretations, and to hold power accountable. It is wrong to criticize it for failing to carry out science-based monitoring when doing so is hardly its job and when another institution—social science—has that job as its explicit charge.

Real-Time Monitoring via Scholar-Driven Immersive Interviewing

The immersive interviewing carried out within academic social science is a critical fourth prong of our monitoring infrastructure. This academic tradition of immersive interviewing has been built out quite systematically and, as a result, overcomes many of the problems that emerge within its journalistic version. As a social science method, the immersive interview offers the opportunity to capture rich information on how people think, feel, and act (as described in their words), all of which are key assets in detecting new crises and monitoring responses to existing ones. Because it is such a powerful method, it is taking off in all social science fields, even the social-science-adjacent fields of psychology and management (see fig-

Figure 1. Proportion of Articles Using Qualitative Interviews



Source: Authors' tabulation based on Thelwall and Nevill 2021.

ure 1).[3] As sociologists Mario Small and Jessica Calarco (2022) recently concluded, the "importance of interview. . . methods to social science, and to society, is not in question."

Although few, we suspect, would challenge this conclusion, this does not imply that immersive-interviewing research has fully delivered on all the many objectives to which it can be put. It has fallen short, in particular, for purposes of real-time monitoring because it is not typically built on a repeated cross-section design that makes it possible to benchmark change against a known baseline, not always based on samples that are large enough to reach reliable conclusions about the population of interest, and not typically based on samples that are representative of the population of interest. We appreciate that these methodological strictures are not relevant for all the various types of immersive-interviewing research in play. Moreover, even when the researcher's objective is to monitor trends, it is entirely possible that small nonprobability samples will pick up the trend of interest. It is hard not to be impressed by many notable successes of this sort (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Desmond 2017). The core problem, however, is that in the heat of the moment (such as a cascading crisis) we will just never know whether a small nonprobability sample is in fact delivering. If much is at stake in getting it right, we are therefore well advised to carry out complementary studies that rest on a comparable benchmark from the past, a sample size large enough to make it unlikely that sampling variability is driving the apparent trend, and a sampling design that ensures that an artifactual trend has not been generated by changes in the processes by which respondents are selected into the sample.

It is costly to meet these standards. To date, neither the government nor the country's main

3. Although the proportion of economics research that relies exclusively on immersive interviewing is still relatively low, it is becoming more common for economists to include an immersive interview component in studies that are primarily quantitative (see Thelwall and Nevill 2021; Bergman et al. 2020).

philanthropic foundations have been prepared to fund immersive-interviewing research at anything approaching the amounts that currently go to fielding quantitative surveys, building quantitative administrative datasets, or supporting big quantitative research teams. Because immersive interviewing does not typically have access to this level of funding, it continues to take a do-it-yourself individualized form that produces myriad small-scale, unrepresentative, single-use data sets that are privately owned. Under this individualized form, each researcher collects their own dataset tailored to the research question they are taking on, a style of research that has been immensely productive but makes benchmarking, trend analysis, and comparison harder to undertake.

The long-standing presumption has been that immersive interviewing is intrinsically a small-scale individualized operation and that it has remained as such not because it has been starved of funding but because it is well suited for that mode of production. This presumption has never been put to the test because the research field has not been given access to the funding needed to allow for experimentation with other modes of production. The swift ramp-up in public funding for the social sciences privileged quantitative work because, unlike qualitative work, it had the "look and feel" of the natural sciences (Solovey 2020). Fueled by the resulting expansion in funding, quantitative scholarship shifted out of the small-scale individualized mode of production (in which individual scholars were responsible for collecting their own private-use datasets), and the multidomain (omnibus) public-use survey became a go-to source for quantitative scholars in many fields. These new datasets were much larger than their predecessors, relied heavily on new methods of probability sampling, and made it possible for researchers to hand over the task of data gathering to specialist data collectors in government or other professionalized research firms. The key point here is that the very same transition out of this individualized small-scale mode of production could not possibly have happened within the qualitative field because the requisite funding was not made available to a field that was derogated as unsystematic and unscientific.

Because qualitative research remains underresourced to this day (and especially so relative to its impact), most qualitative scholars accordingly have little choice but to resort to small nonprobability samples, even when they are attempting to monitor trends in ways that might require larger representative samples.[4] As a result, we simply do not know whether the field would benefit, as has the quantitative field, from developing big public-use datasets that stand alongside the existing individualized research mode. The purpose of the American Voices Project, to which we now turn, was to undertake just that experiment.

THE EXPERIMENTAL AVP

To this point, we have argued that the country's current infrastructure is not always getting the monitoring job done, given the threefold problem that survey and administrative data do not capture the dark matter of our lives, that the variegated primes delivered within social platforms likewise are not fine-tuned to uncover this dark matter, and that existing immersive interviewing within journalism or academia—both of which have the capacity in principle to unlock that dark matter—have been harnessed to modes of production (journalism, small-scale academic projects) that are not funded or organized in ways that always allow them to deliver fully on that capacity. To take on these problems, David Grusky and Kathryn Edin (along with several thought partners) came together some ten years ago to begin planning what would become the American Voices Project. Although they envisioned a public dataset modeled after the GSS, the AVP would allow researchers to hear directly from the American people in their own words, thus unlocking the dark matter.

To reduce costs, their plan was initially very modest. It entailed using survey and administrative data to identify the key types of communities across the country and to then choose one community of each type for immersive in-

4. It should be stressed that many qualitative researchers are uninterested in generalizing to a known population (see Small and Colarco 2022; DeLuca 2022).

terviewing. In 2015, at a meeting at the Russell Sage Foundation with leading academics and potential funders, economist Greg Duncan challenged the AVP team to think bigger. What was needed, he said, was a large, representative study where all Americans—not just those within the exemplar communities—had an equal chance of being heard. Following the model of the GSS, we then embraced the vision of creating a permanent platform that was based on a probability sample, that oversampled low-income Americans (because they lack the money, power, and networks to be adequately heard), and that would be open to secondary analysis.

In 2016, a distinguished group of quantitative and qualitative scholars came together to fulfill this vision, with plans to launch an experimental immersive-interviewing platform (the experimental AVP) funded by many of the country's top foundations and supported (via key staff infrastructure) by a coalition of Federal Reserve Banks (Alexander et al. 2017). After two years of piloting in seven communities across the nation, the AVP was fielded from 2019 to 2022 as the country's first qualitative data-collection effort that was nationally representative, large-scale (2,700 interviews), and multiple-domain (omnibus). Based on its signature tell-me-the-story-of-your-life prompts (with semi-structured probes), the AVP would, it was hoped, engender the deep listening that could provide evidence on the everyday experiences, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a representative sample of Americans. The main objectives were to collect new types of data on the social scientific issues of the day, to explore the feasibility of establishing a permanent AVP platform, and to examine whether this platform might address some of the problems with using current immersive-interviewing research for purposes of real-time monitoring.

Just as the GSS, for example, seeks to cover a host of life domains, so too the AVP was conceived from the start as an omnibus study. After delivering the tell-me-the-story-of-your-life prompt, the AVP probed on a broad range of life domains via open-ended, nonjudgmental questions. It addressed such topics as the rhythm and routine of everyday life in the family, neighborhood, and workplace; employment, earnings, and job search; household spending and consumption practices; health and health care of family members; experiences with schooling and childcare; mental health, drug use, anxiety, and stress; parenting, family conflict and trauma, and family support; views on religion and meaning in life; political views and voting behavior; and attitudes about race, racism, social class, and inequality. The prompts also yielded detailed information about expenditures and income, including resources gleaned from cash and in-kind social programs (which notoriously suffer from underreporting problems in surveys), informal sources of income, and other ways of making ends meet.[5] Although the core tell-me-the-story protocol was abstract enough to capture a host of possible and often difficult-to-anticipate reactions to systemic challenges, the AVP additionally included several special modules that made it possible to garner unstructured reactions to prominent current events (for example, prompts about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the storming of the Capitol, anti-vaccination attitudes).

These tell-me-the-story prompts, which were delivered holistically as part of an engaging conversation lasting approximately ninety minutes, were followed up with a request to link to past, present, and future administrative data. In the experimental AVP, 82 percent of all respondents consented to such linkages, a rate consistent with that secured in other studies. The resulting linkages, in conjunction with short follow-up surveys (delivered via text message), make it possible to convert each round of the AVP into a panel at relatively low cost. The AVP study then concluded with a short survey ascertaining demographic data and other well-validated survey staples (such as health, mental health, stress and anxiety, political views, perceived social standing, trust, experiences with discrimination).

When the AVP initially went to field in the summer of 2019, all interviews were conducted

5. Interviewers were instructed to continue probing until expenditures and income were reconciled to within $50, a method pioneered by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1997).

in person, with teams of interviewers moving across sites. After the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the protocol was retooled for remote interviewing, and remote fieldwork resumed after a short hiatus. This pandemic-induced retooling obliged the AVP team to develop innovative techniques for remote interviewing that maintained the quality of face-to-face interviewing. These new techniques, which also brought substantial cost savings, are now being further developed as we plan for a permanent AVP platform.

THE ANTICIPATED PAYOFF

We turn now to discussing some of the research benefits coming out of the experimental AVP. It is important to do so because a permanent immersive-interviewing platform is costly and should of course only be built insofar as the research payoff is accordingly substantial. We begin by laying out some of the research benefits that had been anticipated by the AVP team and then examine whether these benefits have been realized by the contributors to this issue as well as other early AVP researchers.

Improved Monitoring

At the start of this essay, we stressed the need to build a better monitoring infrastructure, a twofold task that entails increasing the country's capacity to detect early signs of emerging crises (the discovery objective), and increasing the country's capacity to monitor how people are reacting to and coping with known crises and other rapidly developing social processes (the coping objective). Because we have already discussed these two related objectives in some detail, all that needs to be noted at this point is that the AVP protocol was explicitly designed to deliver on each of them. The tell-me-the-story prompts open windows of discussion across a host of life domains (such as work, religion, family formation, politics, health) that provide rich opportunities for discovery. At the same time, these prompts provide opportunities to understand how respondents are coping with known crises, given that they directly reference life domains and activities that would presumably be affected by most any crisis (loss of work, health challenges, loss of income). To provide further evidence on coping behaviors, the AVP protocol was periodically revised to include new prompts that directly referenced important new developments while it was being fielded. Because the AVP was fielded at a time when many crises played out, there is ample opportunity to assess its value in understanding how people cope with them.

Supporting Cumulative Science

We have emphasized the value of the AVP for real-time monitoring because its large-*N*, representative, public-use design is especially advantageous for monitoring. But many other types of immersive-interviewing research could benefit from a public-use dataset. The AVP should be helpful, for example, in developing a cumulative form of qualitative research oriented to assessing and extending existing findings coming out of immersive-interviewing and other methodological traditions. This work is important to undertake because some of the most influential research in the immersive-interviewing field has been based on small or unrepresentative samples and could benefit from the follow-up analysis that the AVP makes possible.

The value of public-use datasets—within qualitative and quantitative fields alike—is that they provide researchers with a common test bed and data resource that allows for cumulation within a defined data zone. Because this zone covers core institutions (work, family, politics, religion, neighborhoods, health), a strong case can be made for focusing a stream of research on them. Although there is inevitably contestation about what constitutes the core, the virtue of undertaking this process is that it carves out a zone in which cumulation can happen. It generates a concentration of scholarship on core topics, the opportunity to carry out secondary analyses, and ultimately the capacity to yield consensus findings that then become the basis of cumulative science and policy. The foregoing is of course a long-run process, but our hope is that the initial round of experimental AVP analyses (which are partially represented in this issue) will open lines of inquiry that at least hold promise of generating cumulation of this sort.

The simple goal, then, was to expand the footprint of immersive-interviewing research by complementing the existing very successful form with a new defined data zone in which cumulative research is supported. This new form is in no way a substitute for the existing form; that is, just as the GSS's defined data zone can never replace all the critical quantitative work occurring outside it, so too the AVP's defined data zone is but a small complement to the vast amount of critical immersive-interviewing research occurring outside it.

Enabling Discovery

It was hoped that this cumulation would occur in conjunction with a parallel stream of discovery research oriented to generating new hypotheses. The latter line of work entails mining the AVP data for discoveries, not just discoveries that take the form of early warning signs of emerging crises (as we have stressed to this point), but also all manner of other discoveries within the various life domains that the AVP protocol covers. The simple point here is that such discovery work will likely be more successful when samples are large, when they are representative of the groups of interest, and when the underlying data are available for secondary analysis and can therefore be contested and extended.[6]

The extent to which AVP data can indeed generate high-quality discoveries of this sort is open to question. When a division of labor is installed between data collectors and data analyzers (as is the case with all public-use datasets), it means that the analysts are no longer directly participating in the interviews and therefore cannot engage in follow-up exchanges that allow them to pursue promising leads or to address pressing unresolved questions. The AVP trial analyses provide invaluable information on the types of research for which such follow-up exchanges are or are not critical. If we find that public-use datasets can generate high-quality scholarship for a wide range of research questions, it will reduce entry costs into the field and open up new opportunities for students, journalists, and scholars who cannot secure the release time or research support to build their own datasets.

The Payoff to Omnibus Datasets

The defining feature of conventional immersive-interviewing research is a circumscribed division of labor in which a single scholar (sometimes running a small team of research assistants) is responsible for study design, data collection, and data analysis. Under this mode of production, data are typically collected for a single targeted study topic, as no institutionalized mechanism for data sharing or pooled data collection is available (in ways that would yield, for example, an omnibus dataset). The field thus ends up with a host of narrowly siloed and incommensurable datasets that are each tailored to a single research question. Because this approach has, as we have already stressed, yielded a long stream of highly successful studies, no one should question its value or the importance of continuing to build and support it in its current form. The premise of the AVP is simply that this very successful research stream should be complemented with a parallel form of analysis that exploits the multiple-domain data coming out of an omnibus instrument. It is hard to justify the convention that public and philanthropic funding should only be provided for quantitative omnibus datasets.

Why are omnibus datasets, such as the AVP, likely to be valuable within the immersive-interviewing field? It's not just that pooling data-collection efforts via omnibus studies is more efficient and reduces overall demand on respondents. Even more important, the key research case for an omnibus dataset is that, because information on many life domains (family, education, work, religion, politics) is simultaneously available, new opportunities are opened to make unforeseen cross-domain connections and discoveries. This omnibus opportunity is precisely why the NSF-funded General Social Survey (and similarly comprehen-

6. Although some immersive-interview researchers are able to secure the grants needed to collect large representative samples (and to make their data available for secondary analysis), such funding has typically been in very short supply. It is much more common, therefore, for immersive-interview scholars to work within an individualized mode of production that limits the opportunity to collect either a large sample or a probability sample.

sive quantitative datasets funded by other government agencies) have been so successful and have spawned so much breakthrough research. By collecting hundreds of quantitative variables spanning many domains, these datasets have enabled discoveries that were never intended, envisioned, or mandated by the data collectors themselves. The AVP adopts the same omnibus logic as the GSS but applies it by collecting cross-domain narratives rather than cross-domain variables.

The presumption, then, is that just as GSS researchers bring together variables from multiple domains in unanticipated ways, so too AVP scholars will be able to make productive cross-domain connections that lead to important discoveries. Do early traumas leave an imprint across many life domains? Are political extremists (populists) distinctive in an across-the-board fashion that shows up in their family life, religious life, work life, and neighborhood life? Are the lifestyles of social class members likewise distinctive in this across-the-board sense? Or are they instead very heterogeneous because of intersections with other identities? Are workplace decisions deeply affected by events in other life domains (family, religion, politics)? The AVP should make it possible to approach these types of bread-and-butter questions in new and productive ways. Because the AVP corpus of text is relatively large, it will often be useful to approach these questions with machine learning and natural language processing.

Understanding Hidden Populations

The voices of people who are derogated or stigmatized, excluded from mainstream society, or othered in some way are largely unheard and almost always unheeded. The qualitative research tradition has long been committed to studying just such hidden populations and thereby giving voice to those who are voiceless. This work is invaluable. Because it is very costly to study hidden populations, it has not always been possible, however, for qualitative researchers to deliver fully on their commitment to learn from those who have been marginalized. As sociologist Stefanie DeLuca (2022) notes, this representativeness problem has taken two forms: the voices of subpopulations that are expensive to sample are less frequently heard, and the voices of subpopulations that tend to fall into convenience samples are too frequently heard. The former problem means, for example, that there are many more studies of people in the urban North than in the Deep South (given that the urban North has more universities and is therefore easier and cheaper to access), whereas the latter means that even within the urban North there are too many interviews of people who are living very close to universities and thereby prone to falling into the convenience samples of the university's qualitative researchers.

The AVP, because it implicitly shares costs across many users, can bear the high cost of interviewing difficult-to-reach populations and thus help overcome these problems.[7] In the typical small-scale research form, each study typically operates under a stringent budget, given that the interviews will only be used once. With a public-use dataset, the large number of users renders a more expansive budget justifiable (from the point of view of government or philanthropic funders), thus making it possible to increase the sample size, pay the premium for probability sampling, and thereby access small and difficult-to-reach populations. This capacity to listen to rarely heard voices may well be one of the most important payoffs to the AVP.

THE ACTUAL PAYOFF

Given this setup and overview, we can now review the analyses that have thus far come out of the AVP. The AVP data have been analyzed in an initial round of crisis monitoring reports covering the pandemic as it unfolded, a second tranche of analyses that are appearing now in this issue, and a third overflow tranche that was opened to meet the substantial demand

7. The AVP sample was originally designed to represent the unhoused population and people residing on Native lands. These plans had to be abandoned when the pandemic broke out because it was difficult to reach these populations with a remote interviewing protocol. The AVP leadership team is pursuing opportunities to incorporate these populations now.

that could not be met via our partnership with the Russell Sage Foundation. These three experimental rounds of analysis were undertaken in hopes that they will help the AVP team finalize the dissemination process for the full public release of the experimental AVP. Because this preparatory work was pressing, the AVP team proceeded with these experimental releases before all interviews were completed and transcribed, before all variables were cleaned and available, and before the administrative data linkages and follow-up surveys were available. This means that the analytic samples were often small and that the data needed for many important types of analysis were not yet available. The analyses discussed here should therefore be understood as a small and incomplete subset of those that will ultimately be possible.

The researchers featured in this issue were the very first to test the secure server environment that the AVP team is building for future high-volume public use. To protect the confidentiality of AVP interviewees, all analyses had to be completed within this secure environment, and interviews were only made available after redacting identifying data (such as names, addresses, and employers). The articles themselves were released only after they passed disclosure avoidance review (that resulted in further redactions, suppression of small cell sizes, and other confidentiality-protecting interventions). These protections did of course slow down the analyses and subsequent review process. We are working to streamline our processes by drawing on ongoing efforts by the Census Bureau and leading survey firms to improve protocols for deidentification, noise-infusion, and disclosure avoidance review (Pascale et al. 2020).[8]

Monitoring in a Crisis Economy

It is fitting to start with the AVP's monitoring analyses given that, from the outset, the AVP has been conceived as a resource for real-time monitoring. As an initial test of its monitoring capacity, we completed an experimental series of crisis monitoring reports based on analyses of the AVP interviews in the midst of the pandemic, an initiative that was funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. During this critical period in history, the AVP's intrepid team of interviewers was invaluable, often serving as interviewers by day and report-writers by night. The key research objective for these reports was to provide an ongoing, direct, real-time window into the voices of the people as one crisis after another coursed through the country. The resulting reports were among the first to identify how people reacted to being isolated and alone at home, to the loss of jobs and the ramp-up of pandemic relief, to the stark increase in health inequalities, to the new class divide between face-to-face and remote work, to the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement, to the storming of the Capitol, and to the vaccine rollout (Mattingly et al. 2021; Coleman et al. 2022; Freese, Johnson, and Garcia 2021; Grusky et al. 2021; Jackson et al. 2021; Fields et al. 2022).

Although we will not review these reports in any detail, it bears stressing that sometimes their portrait of everyday life resonated with the conventional journalism of the period and sometimes it did not. We should not treat reports that are wholly consistent with journalistic accounts as any less valuable. Because the immersive interviewing within journalism often informs the country's early policy response (despite being based on small or unrepresentative samples), it is important to undertake this testing even when it simply shows that journalism got it right. It is also important, whenever it proves necessary, to use the AVP to revise and extend the accounts coming out of conventional journalism. The reports served this function as well. As but one illustration, it is useful to consider the extensive journalistic treatment of the BLM movement, a treatment that often featured widespread optimism about opportunities for "significant, sustained, and widespread change" (Buchanon, Bui, and Patel 2020). In a crisis report authored by Corey Fields, Rahsaan Mahadeo, Lisa Hummel, and Sara Moore, a core finding was that discussions of systemic change were not as prominent as

8. We hope that, by setting new standards for protecting confidentiality in qualitative data, the AVP will ultimately become part of the initial round of demonstration activities of the National Secure Data Service.

we might think, indeed even the most liberal White respondents were not typically focused on it. To the contrary, they tended to focus on issues of personal growth and awareness, with the objective of understanding and coming to terms with their own privilege. For liberal White respondents, the BLM movement was principally an opportunity to recognize and talk about their privilege, but not so much an opportunity to consider in any fulsome way the institutional changes that might reduce that privilege. By contrast, Black respondents viewed the protests of 2020 as a mandate to move beyond such therapeutic projects to concrete reform, institutional change, and restitution. The report concludes, "Although the ways in which Black and white people talk about race has long differed, the protests of 2020 may accordingly be seen as a wedge event that sharpened this conversational divide" (Fields et al. 2022). Elsewhere, we return to the implications of this divide, but for now we simply want to stress that our real-time analyses helped us better understand what is happening on the ground as different groups came to terms with social change in different ways.

The second tranche of experimental AVP articles (those appearing in this issue) allow us to examine the payoff to crisis monitoring when it takes a slow science—rather than real-time—form. Although the Russell Sage Foundation call welcomed research on all topics, a great many applicants proposed to consider whether conventional survey research, social media monitoring, or journalistic reporting on pandemic society had missed important developments. We did not select too many proposals of this sort because the crisis-monitoring reports already filled this niche and because the window for real-time monitoring had largely passed (given that the AVP data-collection period had ended). We did, however, select some crisis-monitoring proposals to garner additional evidence on the payoff to building a permanent immersive-interviewing platform.

Did these articles bear fruit? In addressing this question, it is useful to begin with the article by Kyle Fee, Sloane Kaiser, and Keith Wardrip (2024, this volume, issue 4; "Catching Up and Coping in the COVID Economy"), a nicely ambitious effort to understand the economy in the midst of the pandemic. The setup for this article is the many competing narratives about how low-income households were faring in the pandemic. Whereas some commentators have argued that pandemic relief programs restored low-income households to a "firm financial footing," others have highlighted the "financial distress that persisted in spite of these programs." As the authors point out, it has been difficult to adjudicate between these competing accounts using administrative data, given that what is truly dispositive is not so much the objective circumstances of households as their reactions to and interpretations of those circumstances. The AVP data are accordingly well suited to add to the discussion. Although the authors note that much of what they found aligns with research based on surveys or administrative data, they also emphasized that this research has not sufficiently appreciated the "acute financial difficulties" that the pandemic engendered. To make ends meet, low-income households struggled in a host of ways (such as taking on debt, borrowing from family or friends), but most prominently by turning to the gig economy and older informal-economy forms (babysitting, fixing appliances, selling handmade goods). These struggles to make ends meet led to "heightened levels of stress, worry, and anxiety" that "challenge the broader notion of households on firm financial footing as a result of the pandemic relief programs." The authors conclude that a permanent immersive-interviewing platform would be a "powerful complement to the growing suite of real-time quantitative data" on the economy.

The other two articles in this section provide a complementary portrait of a pandemic economy that has generated more distress than has typically been appreciated. In the article "Some Surviving, Others Thriving," by Catherine Thomas, Michael Schwalbe, Macario Garcia, Geoffrey Cohen, and Hazel Rose Markus (2024; this volume, issue 4), we learn that a large swath of structurally disadvantaged Americans was mostly "just surviving," given that they were dealing with "major life chaos" because of health and financial problems. Although they tried to cope with this chaos via "persistent high effort and emotional restraint," the authors worry that the American cultural imperative to avoid the negative and seek the positive conceals the extent to which people were being pushed to the breaking point. Because the AVP's interviewers were trained to cultivate open and trusting conversations, they were sometimes able to break through this silver lining imperative, often finding that underneath it lies more discontent and distress than has been appreciated. This distress frequently arises because many people feel that their financial and life challenges are not respected, appreciated, or even seen by others and that they are therefore struggling all alone. The third article in this section—authored by Theresa Rocha Beardall, Collin Mueller, and Tony Cheng (2024; this volume, issue 4)—shows that crisis-induced inequalities are further magnified because many groups face profound administrative burdens when engaging with the high bureaucracy of contemporary U.S. society ("Intersectional Burdens"). This burden takes the form, for example, of struggling to figure out how to make a doctor's appointment, to restore or maintain program benefits, or to otherwise deal with a bureaucracy that treats them as unworthy and undeserving. Because this burden is more likely to be experienced by those who are facing racial discrimination, financial struggles, and other systemic hardships, it again works to magnify inequalities during a crisis.

These conclusions are based on relatively small AVP samples (given that transcription was incomplete) and should of course be revisited with larger samples that would allow us to better understand when survey, administrative, and immersive-interview data yield consistent or inconsistent results. The articles in this issue suggest, however, that conventional monitoring methods (such as poverty measures, unemployment rates, food insecurity measures) would be usefully supplemented with a permanent AVP-styled platform that would provide critical supplementary evidence on how low-income households are faring in a crisis-rich world. This two-platform approach would not only help us pick up economic distress as new challenges emerge but may ultimately make it possible to build better quantitative measures that capture distress more completely.

An Emerging Detachment Crisis?

The articles in the preceding section speak to the AVP's capacity to monitor how people are coping with a known set of crises. If the AVP could also be used to pick up early warning signs of new and emerging crises, that would of course be another important asset. Although it is obviously unfair to expect the next big crisis to be instantly uncovered by one of the small handful of contributors to this volume, it is nonetheless of interest to discuss some of the more troubling findings that have emerged in the early contributions and that arguably provide hints of emerging crises.

The two articles in the emerging-crisis section of this issue are usefully grouped because they converge on the worry that structurally disadvantaged populations have become profoundly disaffected. The first of these—authored by Katherine Cramer, Elizabeth Youngling, and Clinton Rooker (2024; this volume, issue 4)—describes the emergence of a low-income population that feels isolated from mainstream society and buffeted by economic and administrative forces beyond its control ("The Political Implications of Economic Lives"). This is expressed as a sense of futility about getting a decent job, a limited "capacity for interest in politics," and a limited "sense of agency or responsiveness from institutions of any type." As the authors describe it, the outside world becomes a blurry amalgam of institutions (government, workplace, benefits providers) that low-income people do not understand, tend to view as very distant from them, and are lumped together as a "faceless, amorphous force." This blurring is so profound that one interviewee referenced all government institutions vaguely and generically as "they or them."

The second article in this section, authored by Reuel Rogers (2024; this volume, issue 4), describes another structurally disadvantaged population—urban and suburban Black Americans—that is likewise struggling with profound disillusionment ("The Black Suburban Sort"). The interviews discussed in his article reveal a deep resignation about ongoing crime and violence, hopelessness about the prospects for racial justice, and a broad "democratic fatigue." As one respondent put it, "I'm numb to it." When queried about politics, respondents would provide such responses as "I'd rather not talk about it," "it's like repetitive suicide," or "what can I do personally to make a difference?" For this group, there is again an overriding feeling of detachment, spawned by repeated disappointments rather than an incapacity to engage (for a related interpretation, see Thomas et al. 2024, this volume, issue 4).

The upshot is that, although both articles clearly reference the rise of detachment, they rely on different mechanisms that then affect different subpopulations. The detachment that Rogers describes stems from the disillusionment that comes of repeated political failures to address abiding racial inequities, whereas the detachment that Cramer, Youngling, and Rooker describe stems from ongoing personal buffeting by distant and foreign institutions (welfare organizations, government, labor markets). These two forces, as important as they are, may of course be joined by many others that can create isolation and hopelessness (crisis fatigue, rising normlessness, rising addictions, declining fertility) and bring about a wide-ranging detachment crisis.[9] The two articles in the disillusionment section provide in this sense an early warning that our nation's many social problems may have become too overwhelming for too many.

Classical Interpretive Studies

We have also read the contributions for insights into whether scholars can successfully carry out immersive-interview analyses resting on inductive interpretation of themes. This interpretive form—long the backbone of immersive-interviewing research—is of course an important success story within contemporary social science, as evidenced by its growing popularity (Thelwall and Nevill 2021). In building the AVP, many of our (friendly) critics worried that classical interpretive analysis would be compromised, as AVP researchers are no longer engaged in data collection and must therefore forgo the usual back-and-forth between interviewer and interviewee. The AVP leadership team is currently building plans for a permanent immersive-interviewing platform that will allow researchers to carry out follow-up interviews with sample members. Because this would only be viable for research teams that could afford to purchase such interviews, our assumption is that a minority of researchers would have the funds needed to avail themselves of that option. It is important, then, to ask whether a high-quality secondary analysis can be carried out without that follow-up.

The five articles in our classical interpretive methods section make it clear that high-quality secondary analysis is feasible in some cases, but that follow-up interviews are likely to be invaluable in others. The first article, a study of attitudes toward vaccination during the initial rollout period, reveals that views are not nearly as polarized as the survey-based research literature would have it ("Discourses of Distrust"). The authors of this piece—Amy Casselman-Hontalas, Dominique Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2024; this volume, issue 4)—show that negative experiences with the American health-care system are so widespread that pretty much everyone is skeptical about the institution, including liberals who are typically represented as trusting medical science uncritically. The second article in this section, an analysis of health care within the Latinx population, provides a rich description of barriers to access that substantiates some of the key conclusions in the literature ("Can't Buy Me Health-Care Access"). The author, Josefina Flores Morales (2024; this volume, issue 4), also points to problems that haven't been adequately appreciated by prior scholars, such as an extremely high level of medical mistrust within the Latine population (attributable, in part, to misuse of pain medications). The third article, a study of platform-based gig labor by Brandon Jackson (2024; this volume, issue 4), reveals that motivations for engaging in gig work go beyond the usual accounts (need for immediate cash, attractiveness of flexible hours) featured in survey-based research ("Motivated by Money?"). Although

9. The article by Michael Sauder, Yongren Shi, and Freda Lynn ("Multiple Meritocracies") also identifies a large swath of Americans who are "indifferent, accepting, disengaged, apathetic, or alienated."

lower-income workers are indeed typically driven by frequently emphasized supply and demand forces, Brandon Jackson shows that higher-income gig workers often sought gig work simply because they enjoyed the opportunity to learn about their neighbors and neighborhoods. The latter workers noted, for example, that it's interesting to see what people are ordering, to visit new neighborhoods, and to meet new people. The fourth article in this section, an analysis of housing insecurity by Max Besbris, Sadie Dempsey, Brian McCabe, and Eva Rosen (2024; this volume, issue 4), lays out the many ways that housing-insecure people dealt with the new challenges of the pandemic ("Pandemic Housing"). Although one might have thought that new coping strategies would have emerged, they instead find that those in precarious circumstances mainly fell back on such long-standing strategies as doubling up, seeking public benefits, and turning to friends and family (as well as weaker ties). The final article, by Priya Fielding-Singh, Elizabeth Talbert, Lisa Hummel, and Lauren Griffin (2024; this volume, issue 4), complements the large quantitative literature on pandemic caregiving with a tight qualitative study ("Caregiving in a Crisis") showing that working mothers with middle-class jobs found it especially difficult to deal with school closures and to continue delivering tightly curated extracurricular activities for their children (music lessons, playdates, soccer practices). Among middle-class households, stay-at-home mothers were able to adapt to pandemic-induced reductions in schooling and extracurricular opportunities, whereas working mothers found it much harder to continue engaging in "concerted cultivation" and reported much stress, worry, and frustration as a result.

We obviously cannot do justice to these studies here. For our purposes, it is mainly relevant that they show that secondary analysis can often deliver new and useful results, even without the benefit of follow-up questioning. The AVP analyst is, in effect, trading off the loss of follow-up questions for the extra information gleaned across the many domains in AVP's protocol, a trade-off that some contributors explicitly noted and found attractive (Besbris et al. 2024, this volume, issue 4). As true of all omnibus datasets, the AVP's sweet spot is either a research topic that is well covered within the confines of the protocol (such as the AVP's coverage of work, poverty, and family), or one that is more shallowly covered but benefits richly from the breadth afforded by an omnibus approach. The early evidence suggests that an ample range of projects falls into one of these two categories. This is obviously not to suggest that all questions are fully answered even among projects within this sweet-spot zone. As with studies using quantitative omnibus datasets, the studies in this issue sometimes advance the field as much by identifying what needs to be known as by securing definitive results.

Finding Hidden Populations

In our introductory comments, we suggested that yet another sweet spot for the AVP is its capacity to secure low-cost representative samples of people who are derogated, stigmatized, or otherwise excluded from mainstream society. Although qualitative research has long been built around a commitment to listen to and learn from excluded or marginalized populations, it has sometimes been difficult to live up to that commitment because many such populations are hidden from view and costly to sample without resorting to convenience samples. The purpose of this section is to examine how our contributors took advantage of the AVP's capacity to construct a probability sample of small subpopulations. We have included two articles in this section illustrating how hidden populations can be teased out, but in fact many others could have been included in this section as well. For example, many contributors exploited the AVP's capacity to analyze small intersectional populations (involving intersections of racial, gender, economic, or other identities), but it is presumably unnecessary to review this very important AVP asset because it is quite an obvious one.

We have instead selected two studies that reveal how the AVP can be used to find subpopulations that are not readily identified (hidden populations). In our first illustration of this approach, Corey Abramson, Zhuofan Li, Tara Prendergast, and Martín Sánchez-Jankowski attempt to identify those who are experiencing extreme pain, a more daunting task than one might think ("Inequality in the Origins and Experiences of Pain"). The usual approaches to taking on such a problem clearly fall short. If one proceeded by partnering with a hospital, the resulting sample would only pertain to those who are being treated for pain. If one resorted to a convenience sample and advertised for interviews with those in pain, the resulting sample would likely overrepresent those who constructed their identities around pain and suffering (and would no doubt be unrepresentative in all manner of other ways). If one sought to draw a sample from online panel sources (Qualtrics, Prolific, AmeriSpeak), a complicated and expensive set of filter questions would be needed to ferret out those who fall into the sample. These are, then, all unattractive or costly options. The AVP, by contrast, opens the opportunity to draw a probability sample (without any cost to the secondary analyst) that solves all such problems at once by simply searching for respondents who discussed pain during their interviews. Although these discussions could happen in the course of conversations about health and health challenges, they could also come up when discussing work histories, family relations, or any of the other domains covered by the AVP's omnibus protocol. Using this sampling approach, Abramson and his coauthors are able to build a comprehensive map of the social organization of pain and then examine the extent to which pain comes up in everyday conversation, the types of pain inequality that emerge, and the ways in which culpability is featured in discourse about pain and misery.

The second example featured in this section is an article by James Hiebert, Lillian Kahris, and Kristin Seefeldt (2024; this volume, issue 5) on disability and work in the United States ("Making Sense of Health-Related Labor-Market Exits and Disability"). The purpose of their article is to understand the often-stigmatized (and partly hidden) population of people who have withdrawn from the labor market for health reasons. We might again ask how a qualitative scholar would go about sampling from this population. If the scholar proceeded by soliciting interviews from those receiving disability benefits, the resulting sample would exclude those who were ineligible or did not apply for such benefits, a potentially very important omission. If the scholar instead proceeded by advertising for a convenience sample of interviews with those who experienced a "health-related labor-market exit," it would be unclear how that filter was understood by potential respondents and how other selective processes might bias the sample. If the scholar contracted with any standard survey house to draw a probability sample, the cost would be prohibitive. The AVP again cuts through all these problems and allowed Hiebert, Kahris, and Seefeldt to draw the requisite probability-based sample by using the AVP survey to select those not working and then reading through the resulting transcripts to determine whether health problems figured in the withdrawal. After doing so, they then scoured the interviews to determine whether people embraced the identity of disabled, interpreted it as a transition rather than an identity, dismissed it as label assigned to them by others, or rejected it altogether. The resulting study reveals—very compellingly—that people only rarely embrace the identity of disabled even when they are receiving disability benefits or struggling with severe health problems.

We have dwelled on these two articles because they nicely illustrate the potential of the AVP to open a new window for understanding populations that are marginalized, stigmatized, and rarely heard. Because it is typically very expensive to access these populations, they have either been ignored altogether or studied via unrepresentative samples. The AVP resolves this long-standing problem by offering a large representative pool that can be flexibly culled to pull out small hidden populations in automated ways.

Omnibus Analyses

We have noted the various research opportunities that are opened up with an omnibus dataset, but have not yet fully discussed whether our contributors have taken advantage of them. Have the contributors exploited the full information available across various key institutional domains (family, education, work, religion, politics) in the AVP interviews? This section of the issue includes four articles that have explicitly drawn on the omnibus structure of the AVP data. Although many other contributions also relied on cross-domain analyses and could have been included as well, these four will suffice to illustrate the payoff to an omnibus approach. We anticipate that many future studies with the AVP data will likewise rely on its omnibus structure.

The distinguishing feature of these articles is a conceptual interest in understanding the cultural logics that order people's lives. Because these are deep logics, a common conceit is that they will express themselves across a range of life domains, but that is of course a testable assumption that, as we will see, is not always borne out. The second distinguishing feature of these articles follows directly from the first. Because the shared objective is to discern the abstract logics that inform people's lives, it is natural to turn to computational methods (machine learning, natural language processing) that can be readily tailored to ferreting out such logics. Although computational methods thus figure prominently in these pieces, the authors also use interpretative methods to validate and make sense of those abstractions.

In the first of these articles, Michael Sauder, Yongren Shi, and Freda Lynn (2024; this volume, issue 5) examine how people understand the role of luck, merit, and structural forces in determining their own life trajectory ("Multiple Meritocracies"). It would be conventional to address such a question with a survey item providing a preset menu of responses to a query about the importance of merit in getting ahead. Because such survey questions may evoke stock or socially acceptable responses, Sauder, Shi, and Lynn proceed instead by analyzing the manifold accounts about social mobility that emerge organically while telling one's story. By analyzing these on-the-ground accounts, they are able to show that their inner logic is rarely consistent with a vulgar meritocratic view that comes out of survey-based analysis. To the contrary, they find that most everyone understands that their lives reflect a complicated admixture of merit, structural barriers, and contingencies, although there are differences of emphasis in the types of structural barriers that are privileged (as well as the extent to which they are emphasized). In another analysis that exploits the AVP's omnibus format, Shira Zilberstein, Elena Ayala-Hurtado, Mari Sanchez, and Derek Robey (2024; this volume, issue 5) examine the extent to which people view themselves as agentic, as opposed to being passively buffeted by structural forces ("The Self in Action"). Although the conventional hypothesis is that privileged people are more likely to view themselves as agentic, the authors show that all people, including those who are less privileged, tend to view themselves as agentic in some situations and passive in others (or even to subtly intertwine both types of sentiments in the same situation). This approach again exploits the AVP's omnibus format by examining how agency and passivity surface across a wide variety of domains and settings. The third article in this section, by James Chu and Seungwon Lee (2024; this volume, issue 5), uses the AVP's omnibus format to show how people judge and evaluate others across a variety of social contexts ("How Americans Judge"). The main finding is that, when praising family and friends, some people consider whether they are warm or likeable (prosocials) whereas others consider whether they are competent or talented (meritocrats). By contrast, this divide between prosocials and meritocrats recedes in importance when public-sector actors (police, teachers, politicians) are being judged, perhaps because the public sector imposes norms of judgment that mute the particularism of more intimate engagements with family and friends. The final article in this section ("Talk of Family"), a provocative piece by Jessica Hardie, Alina Arseniev-Koehler, Judith Seltzer, and Jacob Foster (2024; this volume, issue 5), follows people as they move through the various institutional domains in the AVP protocol (work, religion, health, criminal justice) and asks whether their families are prominently mentioned in these discussions. This analysis provides a new approach to understanding the extent to which people's lives are enmeshed in and focused on family.

The preceding articles thus exploit the omnibus protocol by uncovering logics that reflect generalized habits of the heart rather than situationally specific ways of acting, judging, or interpreting. The resulting measures of meritocratic, agentic, prosocial, and familistic logics may be understood as competitors to conventional survey-based items that are secured by asking respondents to directly summarize their behavior or sentiments across many settings. When, for example, a survey respondent is asked whether they behave agentically, they are presumably expected to play back in their minds their manifold engagements in manifold settings, ferret out how agentic they have been in each of them, and then calculate the cross-engagement average. Because that is a cognitively demanding operation, one could forgive a respondent for forgoing it and instead falling back on well-rehearsed stock answers. This line of reasoning implies that, rather than asking respondents to rewind, ferret out, and average, we are better off asking them to recount their engagements directly, just as the AVP's omnibus protocol does, and then rely on an algorithm to perform the requisite analysis and averaging on the resulting raw data. The AVP thus opens up the possibility that the various habits of the heart currently ascertained through survey items may be more successfully operationalized and monitored through immersive interviewing.

LIMITATIONS

The analyses in this issue suggest that the AVP is largely delivering as we had hoped it would. The contributors have provided new evidence on the key crises and developments of our time, uncovered hints of new crises in the making, shown that high-quality interpretative analysis does not always require follow-up interviewing, culled important hidden populations from the AVP's large pool of interviews, and used the omnibus form to develop a new suite of measures that may outperform conventional survey-based measures. Although we are heartened by this early round of results, it would of course be unwise to reach any conclusions about the AVP's payoff until additional waves of research using the full dataset are completed.

In carrying out our stock-taking exercise, it is also useful to consider the various concerns of our reviewers and commentators, some of whom have not always been fully convinced that a public immersive-interviewing platform fills a pressing need. The AVP team has engaged frequently with such commentators and critics by hosting AVP conferences, AVP briefing sessions, and various meetings with our trial users and other leaders in the field. We have also benefited greatly from the reviews of this article and the many AVP grant proposals that have been submitted. Although the feedback that we have received in these various ways has sometimes been critical, it has almost always been constructive in ways that have led to important improvements to the AVP methodology. Because the possibility of establishing a permanent immersive-interviewing platform is currently being discussed with leaders in the field, it is especially important to take stock of criticisms relevant to these discussions. The purpose of this section is to do just that by rehearsing the most common criticisms, discussing whether they are on the mark (as dispassionately as we can), and considering whether a future AVP fielding could and should address them.

Criticisms of the Protocol

It is useful to begin by addressing the complications that arise when one seeks to build a public-use platform within a field that has historically focused on individualized data collection and research. When a protocol is designed to serve a wide range of research purposes, the stakes are high and the decisions fraught because public money is being expended in ways that affect what types of research can be undertaken and what will or will not be discovered. It is understandable, therefore, that an important swath of concerns have emerged around the proper scope of the AVP protocol, how it is vetted, and how it can be modified and revised. We will present these critiques by directly paraphrasing some of our reviewers and commentators because they have stated them in nicely direct and pithy terms. These critiques, which are set off as extracts, are followed by our responses.

> The protocol's reach: "Although the AVP protocol covers the interviewee's everyday interactions with important institutions (e.g., the family, neighborhood, workplace), many as-

pects of everyday life aren't touched upon in the protocol and can't be addressed via an AVP analysis. The AVP protocol is too narrowly circumscribed to substitute for conventional privately-collected datasets."

We have led with this line of criticism because it gives us another opportunity to stress that a public immersive-interviewing platform can only complement—but never replace—the immensely valuable individualized research form. Because the immersive-interviewing method has been so productive and successful, our goal is simply to expand its footprint by building a complementary public-use form that can be used whenever researchers address questions within the AVP's core data zone. The AVP's goal is to cover everyday life and sentiments in those institutions (the family, the workplace, and the neighborhood) and cultural domains (religion, politics, identity) that are central to contemporary life and are thus useful gateways to understanding how people live, what they are thinking and feeling, and how they are making sense of their lives. This approach nonetheless leaves much important terrain unexplored; indeed, just as analyses of GSS's core data zone can never replace all the critical quantitative analysis occurring outside this zone, so too analyses of AVP's core data zone will always be but a small complement to the vast amount of immersive-interviewing and related research occurring outside this zone. Although the data zone covered by the AVP interview is thus limited in size, the goal is to broaden it in future AVP fieldings by regularly rotating in special modules that address unfolding crises, emerging topics of interest, or other critical new content.[10] The most important job of the AVP's future advisory board will be to guide the development of the full protocol and to oversee open competitions for the special modules (modeled after the GSS's special module competition). This oversight function entails assessing whether the existing prompts are performing well, testing and evaluating possible new prompts, and otherwise balancing the competing needs for continuity and updating. Because the advisory board is all-important in this sense, it is of course critical that it is broad and diverse, that it represents a wide range of research constituencies, and that it secures input throughout the planning process from all relevant communities and stakeholders.

The differentiation of data collection and analysis: "The AVP has installed a division of labor between data collection and data analysis that prevents researchers from pursuing promising leads or otherwise following up with interviewees. Without this follow-up capacity, the analysis may be shallow and many fundamental questions may remain unanswered."

This concern may be understood as an analog to the common lament among survey analysts that an important causal variable is unavailable in the survey of interest. The standard response to this problem—indeed it is the go-to mantra of all graduate-student advisors—is that survey users should choose to undertake an analysis that is feasible rather than opting for one that is not. Within the AVP context, several of our early users likewise opted to change their research question when they discovered that their original one could not successfully be taken on, a type of problem-selection pragmatism that is the unfortunate cost of doing business in the world of public-use datasets (see Besbris et al. 2024 for an insightful discussion of this point). This is not to gainsay the equally important point that, had follow-up interviewing been made available within the AVP platform, a broader swath of topics could have been examined by combining existing interview material with new probes. Because our critics have been quite convincing on this point, we have built concrete plans for installing a new follow-up capacity whereby interested researchers can contract with the AVP's data-collection organization to carry out reinterviews in future fieldings. This innovation

10. We experimented with this special module approach in the original fielding as well by adding new prompts in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, the early pandemic shelter-in-place orders, the highly contested vaccination rollout, and the storming of the Capitol.

will allow researchers to garner new evidence on possible mechanisms or interpretations, take on puzzles that the original interviews left unresolved, or otherwise exploit the power of reinterviewing. Although researchers can always resort to the usual alternative of mounting their own independent study, the virtue of this new design is that it would exploit the existing probability sample and the existing data already available from the original interview.[11]

> Community engagement: "The AVP research process seemingly runs counter to the growing commitment among social scientists to develop relationships with the communities involved in their studies (i.e., "community-engaged scholarship")."

This critique arises because of the prohibitively high costs of engaging with each of the many communities that serve as secondary sampling units (SSUs) within our national study. Before the pandemic broke out, the AVP interviewers formed small teams that moved from one SSU (census block groups) to the next, a design that allowed them to form relationships with community leaders. We also relied heavily on our Federal Reserve Bank partners to engage with communities in their catchment areas. These relationships were, however, mainly forged after the protocol was developed (and did not, therefore, inform the contents of the protocol itself). In future fieldings of the AVP, engagement with individual SSUs will likely be even more limited (given the high costs of SSU-specific engagement), and other approaches to ensuring a participatory research design will have to be taken. Because it may not be possible to engage with representatives from each of the hundreds of SSUs in future fieldings, it will be especially important to include representatives of the different types of SSUs that are part of the study (such as rural, deindustrializing, or gentrifying SSUs). It is also critical to recognize that many types of communities—not just spatially defined ones—are important to engage. The advisory board for future AVP fieldings should accordingly be charged with building the protocol in collaboration with representatives of all key communities (as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, community type, and other identities), and additionally carrying out cognitive testing across this wide array of groups (with such testing ensuring that the prompts are interpreted as intended and thus provide a valid vehicle for expression). The latter commitment to rigorous cognitive testing, which qualitative scholars do not always undertake, is especially critical given the AVP's interest in properly representing and interpreting the voices of everyone. At the same time, many qualitative scholars who collect their own data are committed to trialing their initial research conclusions and interpretations with community members (and then revising their interpretations as necessary), an approach that secondary users of public-use datasets would do well to emulate. When the full public release of AVP data occurs, we plan on hosting a regular series of AVP conferences that will include not just scholars but also a wide range of community representatives. If this hybrid conference form proves to be successful, we hope that it will be adopted in future AVP fieldings as well.

Criticisms of Probability Samples

The AVP team has also encountered criticisms suggesting that probability samples are not always as useful as they are made out to be. Before we turn to two very reasonable worries about probability samples, it is important to first dispense with a worry that is frequently expressed but based on a misunderstanding of probability sampling. We refer here to the argument that scholars who analyze subpopula-

11. Although we are very excited about installing this follow-up capability, it bears emphasizing that the vast majority of immersive-interview studies have relied on one-off interviews rather than repeated interactions (between interviewer and interviewee). The opportunity for follow-up interviews may nonetheless prove more valuable within a public-use context because the first-round interviewers may not have probed in ways that the secondary user would have (as the first-round interviewers were not likely animated by the particular research topic being pursued by that secondary user). The best way to determine the value of this follow-up capability is to install it in the next AVP fielding and examine how frequently it is used and to what effect.

tions (such as Asians, single adults, or sports fans) of a national probability sample cannot treat those subpopulations as probability samples themselves. This is an incorrect conclusion (see DeLuca 2022). The great benefit, to the contrary, of a national probability sample is precisely that it does yield spinoff probability samples for any subpopulation within the original sample. This means that researchers interested in a subpopulation analysis within the AVP can secure all the benefits of a probability sample without having to draw one on their own.

The AVP thus makes it possible to draw hundreds of subpopulation probability samples at no cost to the secondary user. As attractive as this sounds, our critics have suggested that this theoretical benefit may not always be available in practice, given that many subpopulations of interest are either small or hidden. We discuss each of these two problems in turn.

> Small populations: "In many cases, researchers wish to study very small populations, like people in a small town, people who have a rare disease, or people who are members of a fringe political or religious group. The AVP is quite unuseful in these situations."

This critique makes the important point that, whenever a researcher has an intrinsic interest in a very small population, the AVP will not be useful because it will not have enough—or perhaps any—cases within the population of interest. Because this point is uncontroversial, we have relatively little to add. We simply reiterate that the AVP, like the GSS and other omnibus public-use datasets, was never designed to replace very valuable existing forms of research that are able to target extremely small populations. The only supplementary point we would make is that sometimes a study site, such as a deindustrializing town, is chosen not because of an intrinsic interest in that particular site but because it is viewed as a convenient vehicle for examining how small-town deindustrialization plays out more generally, how workers cope with deindustrialization in a small-town setting, or some other more generic question about deindustrialization. It is not uncommon to choose sites precisely because they are exemplars in this sense. When that is indeed the case, a large-population study is in effect masquerading as a small-population one, and an AVP-based analysis might well be feasible and useful, but only insofar as the analysis in question does not require a large observation-per-site ratio.[12] The researcher might, for example, proceed by pooling interviewees across all deindustrializing sites in the AVP rather than carrying out a case study of one such site. If doing so still failed to yield an adequate sample size, the researcher could also consider pooling across multiple fieldings of the AVP.[13] This approach can open up many attractive opportunities to understand important—albeit small—subpopulations without having to resort to nonprobability samples. If a researcher pooled, for example, five annual AVP samples (with two thousand observations per year), they could expect to find approximately one hundred people who identify as transgender (USA Facts 2020), approximately fifty-five affiliates of Jehovah's Witnesses (PRRI 2021), approximately 550 believers in QANON (Uscinski et al. 2022), and approximately ninety users of methamphetamines (National Survey of Drug Use and Health 2021). Although it is often argued that very small groups of this sort can only be studied via nonprobability samples, the AVP opens up an important alternative approach that allows for generalizations to known populations.

12. It is important to reiterate here that a pooled AVP analysis of deindustrializing sites would yield very few observations per site and would not, therefore, be viable for any analysis that demands a great many observations per site. If, for example, a scholar sought to undertake a full-network analysis of the effects of deindustrialization, a pooling approach would almost certainly be inadequate to the task (because it would not be possible to represent the full network in any given site). The larger point here is that a great many important research projects require single-site designs of the sort that the AVP could never handle.

13. Under current plans for future fieldings, the AVP will be fielded continuously (with four quarterly samples per year).

> Hidden populations: "The AVP cannot be used to study hidden populations unless interviewees are explicitly queried about their membership in the population of interest. Moreover, whenever the group of interest is stigmatized (and many hidden populations are of course stigmatized), even a direct query won't get the job done because interviewees may be reluctant to discuss the relevant identity or behavior."

This second critique again takes aim at the practical usefulness of the AVP in studying small populations that are hidden because they are not based on a frequently adopted identity (of the sort that might be ascertained in, say, the AVP's follow-up survey). The subtext of this critique is that, although the AVP has the theoretical capacity to generate probability samples of important hidden populations (such as conspiracy theorists), in practice it is very difficult to ascertain members of these populations without including an explicit query about membership (such as "are you a conspiracy theorist?"). If this claim were generally true, it would reduce the usefulness of the AVP because the protocol would need to anticipate all the subpopulations of interest and then query systematically about each of them. We are not convinced, however, that this identities-must-be-queried claim is indeed true. The main reason we are unconvinced is that many AVP authors have been able to successfully identify hidden subpopulations by searching for relevant markers within the interviews. These scholars have shown, for example, that the AVP interviews can identify conspiracy theorists (Bauvois et al. 2023), those experiencing severe pain (Abramson et al. 2024), those too sick to work (Hiebert, Kahris, and Seefeldt 2024), and those who have experienced a sexual trauma (Caputo et al. 2024). We do of course need to worry about false negatives. It is possible, for example, that those who do not engage in conspiracy talk within an AVP interview are in fact conspiracy theorists but are reluctant to talk about it because it is stigmatizing. To address this worry, the gold standard approach would be to draw a subsample of AVP interviewees who do not engage in conspiracy talk, and to then follow up with a reinterview that uses best-practice prompts to draw out possible shy conspirators (using the new follow-up capacity discussed). Although this gold standard approach has not yet been deployed within the AVP context, it is at least reassuring that the existing AVP-based rates of conspiracy talk, severe pain, sexual trauma, and health-induced withdrawals largely comport with rates from other trusted sources. It is thus plausible that, because the AVP interview adopts well-tested approaches to reducing stigmatization (such as normalizing all responses to prompts), a gold standard approach might not yield all that many false negatives. This is not to question the importance of directly testing that conjecture by estimating the number of false negatives when the AVP's new follow-up capacity is installed. The results from such tests will not only provide high-quality evidence on stigmatized behaviors but also could be used to improve the AVP's existing methods for enabling open, honest, and judgment-free conversations.[14]

Criticisms Pertaining to Analytic Complications

The last set of worries pertain to the various data-processing complications that arise when analyzing large numbers of immersive interviews. Because our trial users were entering uncharted territory, they faced a host of problems that the AVP team had only imperfectly anticipated, many of which had to be solved on the fly and often quite imperfectly. We are immensely grateful for their patience in working through these complications. It is useful to share some of the data analytic concerns that they or our reviewers raised and discuss how these concerns might be addressed with new software and methods for large-*N* qualitative datasets.

> Industrial-sized analysis: "Although a large-*N* dataset may be useful for analysts using computational methods, the payoff is less clear for

14. Before the AVP was fielded, the interviewers underwent a full month of intensive training, with the last week of that training devoted to trial interviews carried out under the supervision of seasoned interviewers.

> those using classical interpretive methods. It's simply impossible for a single scholar—or even a modestly-sized team—to process all the interviews that are now available."

The AVP leadership team had not, we have to confess, anticipated this concern. We instead worried that the AVP sample was too small to meet the needs of scholars who wished to locate hidden populations, to carry out intersectional analyses, or to use data-intensive computational methods. It was a mistake on our part to fail to appreciate that many scholars found the AVP attractive not because it could be sliced and diced into various subpopulations of interest but because its underlying probability sample made it possible to generalize to the U.S. population while still using classical interpretative methods. For these scholars, the large sample that was part and parcel of the AVP design was a mixed blessing, as it simply took too long to read, hand code, and digest all the interviews (even with the luxury of modestly sized teams of analysts). In most of the early AVP analyses, this complication was sidestepped because the research began before all interviewing or transcribing was completed, and the available sample was therefore relatively limited in size.[15] Because a large sample now is available, it is clear that improved software is needed to support large-*N* qualitative analysis, software that makes it possible to work efficiently with large coding teams, that allows for crowdsourced coding, and that supports mixed-methods analysis (at the individual level) more seamlessly. Even with such tools, scholars who prefer to work alone or in small teams may choose to draw a random subsample of interviews insofar as they wish to generalize to the U.S. population, thereby reducing the amount of reading and coding without any sacrifice of representativeness. It may also be useful to deploy analytic approaches that qualitative researchers have designed to reduce the cognitive burden of analyzing larger datasets or to exploit large language models (LLMs), natural language processing (NLP), and various automated coding regimens.[16] Whenever researchers have explicit hypotheses in play, they can also use power tests to settle on the requisite sample size in advance, an approach that eliminates the intrinsic subjectivity (and resulting bias) of asking the analyst to decide when saturation has been reached. Although we are unconvinced, therefore, that industrial-sized analysis is an intrinsic problem, we do of course agree that qualitative software needs to be upgraded to work more seamlessly with large numbers of cases, large research teams, crowdsourced coding, and individual-level mixed-methods data.

> Weights and classical interpretive analysis: "The AVP weights are of course useful for those using quantitative computational methods, but it's unclear how to use them within the context of classical interpretive analysis. If interpretive scholars opt to simply

15. The sampling design for the pandemic-year AVP was based on quarterly samples because this allowed analysts to make inferences about the U.S. population every quarter rather than waiting for all 2,700 interviews to be completed.

16. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing to various exemplar approaches (Timmermans and Tavory 2022; Small 2009) for analyzing large qualitative data sets. These approaches begin with a very small subsample of cases or even a single case and then examine how this subsample (or single case) yields conclusions that may differ from other cases. Because such approaches are labor intensive, LLMs could be harnessed to compare the text of this scholar-selected index case to all other cases in the data set, thereby generating a subset of discrepant cases for further analysis by the scholar. This machine process could be run multiple times with slight prompt variations to provide confidence intervals on the analysis subset that was ultimately chosen. It would also be possible to develop a more thoroughgoing form of LLM-based coding by drawing on coding manuals produced by expert qualitative researchers, passing them to the LLM, assessing the capacity of the LLM to reproduce the coding decisions of human coders on held-out data, and iterating on this process until the LLM passes a threshold of acceptable performance. The upshot is that we are confident that the large-*N* problem can be addressed via a host of human and automated data-reduction techniques, including, at worst, simply taking a random sample of the data.

> ignore the weights, they cannot any longer safely generalize to the population of interest, thereby losing one of the main payoffs to an AVP analysis."

The AVP data come with precalculated sampling weights because the AVP sampling design incorporated an oversample of some subpopulations and because response rates among those selected into the sample differed across subpopulations. We also provide AVP users with the data fields needed to adjust for clustering and other sampling design features. For scholars carrying out quantitative analyses of the AVP data, no special or unusual complications thus arise. The interpretive analyst, by contrast, does not have the benefit of best-practice guidelines that help them exploit the representativeness of the AVP data. At the data analysis stage, the interpretive scholar of course wants to be able to learn from the data in unbiased ways, ideally exploiting sampling weights to that end. In this context, the separation of data collection from data analysis is potentially an asset because it makes it possible to develop data-delivery software that feeds interviews to the analyst in ways that offset known bias-inducing dynamics, such as confirmation bias. We could imagine, for example, interview-delivery software that uses sampling weights to correct for nonresponse bias when delivering interviews to analysts (meaning that interviews with, say, a weight of 2 would be twice as likely to be pushed out to the analyst). In this way, analysts are delivered a representative experience as they read the interviews, thus reducing the risk that nonresponse bias or chance clustering of certain types of interviews installs an improper prior that is then hard to overcome. For scholars who prefer to use a saturation rule, this approach would ensure that judgments about saturation are not affected by an unrepresentative feed, thus reducing at least some of the subjectivity associated with this rule. This approach could similarly be applied at the subpopulation level to ensure that a representative sample is delivered and then experienced within each of the groups of interest. We are not of course suggesting that the foregoing example solves all problems or that it is in any way straightforward to overcome the host of cognitive biases that affect interpretive analysis (and all other forms of analysis). We are instead suggesting that public-use datasets offer important opportunities to experiment with possible approaches, to assess their bias-reducing effects, and ultimately to develop software and analytic approaches that improve the quality of social science research.

CONCLUSIONS

During the build-out of the experimental AVP platform, a fair number of AVP skeptics worried that there would not be much demand for the data, a worry that is quite reasonable given that collecting one's own data is deeply built into the immersive-interviewing field and serves, in effect, as a rite of passage. We are gratified, in light of this worry, that the response to our open call attracted the second-highest number of applications in this journal's history. Because applicants were so numerous, we had to open a second tranche of trial analyses, and many promising results from that second tranche are now appearing. We are grateful to all our early users in helping us prepare for the full rollout and for providing critical early evidence on the payoff to the AVP.

As discussed, the AVP also has garnered its fair share of criticism, although arguably the amount of criticism in play is quite modest for a field infamous for contention. The criticisms that have been proffered have almost invariably been constructive and have motivated important improvements to the AVP's methodology. With these concerns in mind, a large team of AVP advisors is currently consulting with data-collection organizations, government agencies, and possible funders to explore how the experimental AVP is best converted into a permanent immersive-interviewing platform.

As the trial period comes to a close and we move to full dissemination of the experimental AVP, it is worth asking how a permanent platform (one that is continuously in the field and allows for real-time public use) would likely play out. If the early AVP results can be safely extrapolated, one would have to conclude that a permanent platform would have a substantial effect on basic and applied social science, likely a larger effect than that of adding yet another public-use quantitative dataset to an already crowded field of such datasets. This new qualitative platform, because it would be fine tuned for discovery, would send a signal that we care about detecting and monitoring social problems as much as we care about detecting and monitoring natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, fires, or earthquakes. The amount of monitoring research would take off; the capacity to detect crises in the making would improve; the high costs of a delayed diagnosis would be reduced; and journalists (and their critics and competitors) would have a real-time probability sample of Americans at their disposal. By exploiting the dark matter of immersive interviews, this new platform would also help us build better predictive models of key outcomes (such as poverty, homelessness, depression) and then use these models to improve social programs and advance basic science. The new infrastructure would likewise give conventional survey-based opinion and attitudinal measurement a run for its money by developing powerful new NLP-based measures of sentiments from the raw material of everyday life (rather than attempting to surgically elicit sentiments by simply asking about them). The AVP platform may also give conventional social media analysis a run for its money by supporting new NLP-based measures of sentiments that are primed in known and controllable ways, that are comparable over time and across subgroups, and that are based on representative rather than highly selective samples. Across all these fields, the new platform would serve as a shared testbed, and a more cumulative form of qualitative work would emerge through increased replication, reinterpretation, and systematic accretion and extension (Weeden 2023). This new field of large-*N* qualitative work would rapidly grow as students are trained with public-use datasets in high school, college, and online classes, as new types of large-*N* qualitative analysis software are developed, and as entry barriers are dramatically reduced and open the field to less-resourced scholars lacking the sabbatical time and money needed to collect their own datasets. It follows that this new platform would enrich basic social science, applied social science, and even social scientific journalism.

It is unlikely that this new work, as important as it is, would come at the expense of the very successful individualized form of immersive interviewing. When public-use datasets were introduced into the quantitative field in the 1950s, the corresponding individualized form of quantitative research nonetheless remained strong and prominent, indeed it was periodically reenergized by the introduction of various cost-saving innovations, such as the rise of remote interviewing and the introduction of online panels. The same outcome is very likely within the immersive-interviewing field. It would remain the country's go-to resource for addressing topics not covered in the public-use dataset, for carrying out in-depth studies that go well beyond what is available in the omnibus protocol, and for capturing hidden populations that are just too small or too vulnerable to be reached with a public-use dataset. At the same time, the public-use form would generate new questions that could only be addressed with one-off studies, thereby further increasing demand for them. The available evidence suggests that the GSS, for example, has had precisely this effect within the quantitative field (Davern et al. 2021). The permanent immersive-interviewing platform currently being planned would also reduce the cost of one-off studies (and thus expand their reach) by allowing for piggyback studies with empaneled AVP respondents. For all these reasons, it is likely that the public-use form will always play a complementary role, serving in effect as a form of brand differentiation that testifies to the larger success of immersive-interviewing research.

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IV

Ferreting Out Hidden Populations

Inequality in the Origins and Experiences of Pain: What "Big (Qualitative) Data" Reveal About Social Suffering in the United States

COREY M. ABRAMSON, ZHUOFAN LI, TARA PRENDERGAST, AND MARTÍN SÁNCHEZ-JANKOWSKI

This study examines how Americans' narratives of pain are connected to social inequalities using more than 1,500 in-depth interviews collected as part of the American Voices Project. Our novel mixed-method approach to these "big (qualitative) data" uses machine learning and qualitative analysis to demonstrate that discussions of physical pain are prevalent across groups, but narrative content varies by demographics including educational background and gender identity. Our findings demonstrate (1) that pain is commonly described as a challenge that shapes everyday life, (2) that pain narratives often invoke morality and distinction, and (3) that narratives diverge around discussions of unequal medical treatment, illness identities, vulnerability and suffering. We discuss the implications of our findings for scholarship on inequality and experience, social scientific methods, and health policy.

Keywords: inequality, pain, suffering, culture, health, computational ethnography, mixed-methods, machine learning, social determinants of health, in-depth interviews

This article examines what Americans have to say about pain and what their answers reveal about social inequality and suffering. Qualitative and computational analyses of more than 1,500 interviews from the American Voices Project (AVP) support the finding that physical pain, in both acute and chronic forms, is a prevalent and significant health challenge for Americans (Domenichiello and Ramsden 2019; Burke 2019; Fayaz et al. 2016). Although discussions of pain are widespread in these data, narrative content varies by demographic characteristics, including educational attainment and gender identity. Our findings show that Americans from varied backgrounds indicate that pain creates substantial challenges and that

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pain and its management are framed in moral terms as either stigmatizing or distinguishing; however, accounts diverge around discussions of unequal medical treatment, illness identities, vulnerability, and suffering. We argue that examining pain narratives using these unique data provides insights into how inequalities shape experiences with suffering (Bourdieu 1999), health (Freese and Lutfey 2011), social scientific methods for analyzing large qualitative and mixed-methods datasets (Abramson et al. 2018), and equitable health policies in the wake of the opioid epidemic (Smirnova 2023).

Social Inequality and Disparate Pain

A substantial body of research shows that health and illness rates reflect broader inequities (Freese and Lutfey 2011). Unequal exposure to environmental risks, disparate opportunities for maintaining wellness, unequal treatment by medical institutions, and numerous other mechanisms translate patterns of social disadvantage into negative morbidity and mortality outcomes (Link and Phelan 1995; Geronimus 2023; Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003; Woolf and Aron 2013). In the United States, inequalities along socioeconomic, racial, and gender lines influence health from birth (Jones et al. 2019; Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003). Social inequalities shape how long we live, our likelihood of remaining in good health, and the supports that are available when we become ill (Abramson 2015; Carr 2019; Woolf and Aron 2013; Newman 2004). An expanding body of empirical evidence supports a core related claim of sociological theory—inequalities get "under our skin," shaping our health and bodies in ways that connect social structures and biology (Durkheim 1984; Mason 2013; Powell-Wiley et al. 2020; Turner 2008; Walters et al. 2011).

Pain is a central aspect of health and illness. In contemporary integrative accounts, pain is defined as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage" (Raja et al. 2020, p. 1976).[1] Pain reflects not just biology, but our experiences with the social world, simultaneously shaping behavior in complex ways (Biedma-Velázquez et al. 2022; Zajacova, Grol-Prokopczyk, and Zimmer 2021b). Research indicates that chronic pain (lasting more than three months) can be a powerful barometer of both quality of life and population health, and that reported pain levels in the United States have increased in the twenty-first century (Zajacova, Grol-Prokopczyk, and Zimmer 2021b; Mills, Nicolson, and Smith 2019).[2] Pain is a chief complaint

1. This article examines physical pain in a broad sense, including both chronic and acute variants. In a prospective study design, examining chronic pain (pain that lasts more than three months) has the advantage of being a condition in and of itself, whereas acute pain is more likely a symptom (possibly fleeting) of something else (Siddall 2013; Zajacova 2021a). Acute pain is more difficult to sample. Because the AVP does not select on people with pain, examining narratives of both chronic and acute pain allows us to cast a broad net to uncover potential commonalities that might be missed by a narrower focus, including connections to inequality that may be obscured by a priori boundaries that may not reflect experiences (Cicourel 1982). Acknowledgment is also growing of important similarities, including that both classes of pain can catalyze neuronal remodeling, that experiences of both are informed by individual beliefs and attitudes (Carr and Goudas 1999), and that chronic as well as acute pain co-occur with other forms of suffering such as anxiety and depression (for example, De La Rosa et al. 2023; Carr et al. 2005). More broadly, this follows our goal of using the case of pain to understand connections between inequality, experience, and suffering (Bourdieu 1984; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997).

2. The reported prevalence of both acute and chronic pain has increased over the last twenty years in the United States (Zajacova, Grol-Prokopczyk, and Zimmer 2021a). Estimates indicate one in fourteen American adults experience "high impact" chronic pain, which means their life and work activities are limited for substantial periods of time most days or everyday, and many experience intermittent pain (Dowell et al. 2022; Yong, Mullins, and Bhattacharyya 2022). This has implications for socioeconomic institutions as well as social suffering. By the early 2010s, chronic pain was estimated to cost between $560 and $635 billion in direct medical costs, lost productivity, and disability (Gaskin and Richard 2012). By 2019, estimates posit an annual loss of $79.9 billion in lost wages and an impact on GDP of $216 billion (Yong, Mullins, and Bhattacharyya 2022). Chronic pain is one of the most common reasons American adults seek medical care (Lara-Milan 2021; Schappert and Burt 2006). Some suggest the costs associated with pain exceed those of other leading conditions (Gaskin and Richard 2012).

driving health-care use; it is associated with lost productivity and contributes to the prescription and use of addictive and increasingly criminalized narcotics (Ballantyne 2015; Voon, Karamouzian, and Kerr 2017; Vowles et al. 2015).[3] The divergence in pain levels across groups has been linked to historical disparities in accidents, violence, hazards, and unequal treatment in medical institutions, which shape stress, illness, and well-being (Mullins, Yong, and Bhattacharyya 2022; Janevic et al. 2017). Furthermore, disparities in pain control have been documented along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Anderson, Green, and Payne 2009). Addiction to narcotic painkillers can have devastating effects, especially for those who occupy a precarious position in America (Smirnova 2023).[4]

Dedicated empirical examinations of the meanings of pain have used qualitative methods to contribute alongside work using statistical approaches to chart patterns and trends. Such examinations have focused on the disruptions surrounding chronic pain and their influence on everyday experiences (Charmaz 2002; Toye et al. 2021). This work illustrates how pain can pervade peoples' lives, limit activity in the present, and create uncertainty about the future (Bunzli et al. 2013; MacNeela et al. 2015). Chronic pain can cause people to feel betrayed by their bodies and limit their interactions with others (Snelgrove, Edwards, and Liossi 2013; Froud et al. 2014; Kirkham, Smith, and Havsteen-Franklin 2015; Nortvedt et al. 2016). Concerns about stigma related to both pain and medical treatment are also common, as is discussion of the challenge and importance of making physical pain legible as legitimate to health care providers (Souza et al. 2011; Hopayian and Notley 2014; Toye et al. 2013; Peilot et al. 2014). These accounts further illuminate how coping requires considerable time and effort for those suffering from chronic pain (Finlay, Peacock, and Elander 2018; Wilson et al. 2017; Ojala et al. 2015).

Pain, Experience and the Social Organization of Suffering

Pain has wide-reaching effects on societies, institutions, and individuals. However, it is a challenging empirical object because its intertwined physical, psychological, and social aspects limit reductionism (Turk and Okifuji 2002). Physical pain is shaped by biology, emotions, beliefs, culture, and socialization (Bendelow and Williams 1995; Peacock and Patel 2008). It is also experienced as a deeply personal phenomenon: *subjective* distress in bodily sensation. Yet more vulnerable members of society are at an *objectively* greater likelihood of experiencing trauma, illnesses, and accidents that place them at disproportionate risk for pain and

3. The presence of chronic pain is treated as a condition unto itself; epidemiological estimates suggest that this kind of pain affects approximately one in five adults in the United States or approximately fifty million people (Yong, Mullins, and Bhattacharyya 2022). Chronic pain can exacerbate depression, anxiety, and everyday challenges, resulting in tremendous human suffering that extends beyond physical discomfort, expenses, and broader economic costs (IsHak et al. 2018; De La Rosa et al. 2023; Sampson et al. 2015; Siler, Borneman, and Ferrell 2019).

4. Over the last decade, an ongoing epidemic of opioid use emerged against this backdrop. A number of scholars argue that some or much of this epidemic was driven by multiple factors, rather than just pharmaceutical entrepreneurship and opportunism. These include the increasing prevalence of chronic pain (Zajacova, Grol-Prokopczyk, and Zimmer 2021a, 2021b), the stress of declining economic opportunities (Case and Deaton 2020), disparities in addiction and addiction treatment (Hansen, Netherland, and Herzberg 2023), the medicalization of suffering and the subsequent criminalization of coping strategies (Smirnova 2023), and a patchwork market-based health-care system that enabled pharmaceutical entrepreneurship to market addictive pain medications (Currie and Schwandt 2021). Increases in opioid prescriptions for pain were accompanied by opioid related substance use disorders as well as deaths (Phillips, Ford, and Bonnie 2017). The opioid epidemic has led to scores of deaths, suffering, a moral panic (Mendoza, Rivera, and Hansen 2019), and increasing criminalization and surveillance (Sue 2019) that have been particularly devastating to vulnerable populations (Bridges 2020) and make management of pain more fraught for the most vulnerable.

consequently suffering more broadly (Bourdieu 1999; Farmer 1996; Kleinman 1997).[5] The distribution of pain in society also reflects structural violence that shapes workplaces, neighborhoods, and homes, creating patterns of social suffering (Bourdieu 1999; Farmer 1996).[6] Finally, the historical contexts in which we live influence which remedies are available, and whose pain is recognized or silenced (Bendelow 2006; Farmer 2006; Peacock and Patel 2008). This complexity makes pain sociologically revealing because it offers important insights into the social organization of suffering (Farmer 1996; Biedma-Velázquez et al. 2022; Zajacova, Grol-Prokopczyk, and Zimmer 2021b).

As a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, pain offers social scientists an important object of study for advancing connections between social structure, the human body, and experience. Sociologists and social psychologists have long argued that personal experiences such as pain exhibit commonalities in ways that are not reducible to biological universals or radical individuality (for example, Durkheim [1893] 1984; Elias 1939; Goffman 1978). In this framework, our experiences are mediated by our position in social hierarchies, and the educational, health, social, and labor institutions that shape our actions and beliefs over the life course (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1939; Sewell 1992; Wacquant 2004).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1999) extended this line of inquiry by articulating a model of how the objective and subjective manifestations of inequality are intertwined. In his conceptualization, subjectivities (internal experiences) are objectively distributed in ways that reflect and reinforce social divisions from birth (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992). Institutions validate the experiences and practices of socially advantaged groups, positioning theirs as proper and meritorious, naturalizing inequality in the process (Bourdieu 1984). Class-based ways of thinking, acting, speaking, and perceiving the world provide a form of capital (Bourdieu 2018) that reflects and extends other advantages (Bourdieu 1984) in schools, markets, and hospitals, providing advantages in securing everything from college admission to narcotics (Abramson 2015; Lareau 2003; Shim 2010; Wacquant 2004). Others have added that race, gender, age, and their intersections can function similarly, organizing opportunities, experiences, and access to resources (money, social networks, credentials) in ways that reinforce hierarchies (Tilly 1999) and discount the experiences of socially marginalized groups (Collins 1992).

Examining connections between pain and American society (Bendelow and Williams 1995) in dialogue with such a perspective offers potential insights into inequality (Bourdieu 1984), social suffering (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997), and the organization of experience more broadly (Goffman 1972; Collins 1992, 2000). Our examination of the unique AVP data provides a contribution by illustrating multilevel connections between social inequality, Americans' experiences of pain and the organization of suffering.

METHODOLOGY

This article empirically examines experiences of pain in the contemporary United States, and how these experiences are connected to inequality and stratification.

5. Suffering refers to broader experiences of distress and hardship, continuing beyond how people categorize physical pain. Social suffering includes both individual and collective aspects of pain, which offers an empirical entrée to the topic (Farmer 1996; Bourdieu 1999; Siler, Borneman, and Ferrell 2019).

6. Reports of levels of pain have been empirically connected to both demographic shifts and social stratification. One group, older adults, form a growing proportion of the population, report high rates of pain, and describe how pain is important to their lives in ethnographic research (Abramson 2015; Domenichiello and Ramsden 2019). Americans with less than a high school degree are the most likely subgroup to report experiencing severe pain that effects their life, work, and family most days (Mullins, Yong, and Bhattacharyya 2022). Other demographics that disproportionately suffer from sustained periods of pain include nonwhites, women (Mullins, Yong, and Bhattacharyya 2022; Bartley and Fillingim 2013), poor and working-class individuals (Jay et al. 2019; Mullins, Yong, and Bhattacharyya 2022).

Research Questions and Expectations

We ask three interrelated research questions:

Q1: How do Americans talk about pain?

Q2: Do pain narratives vary in ways that are connected to patterns of inequality?

Q3: If so, how?

We had three expectations based on prior empirical research and theory.[7]

E1: Pain will create challenges and disruptions for people across demographic groups.

E2: Narratives of pain will invoke cultural understandings, moral assessments, and structural limitations on coping behaviors.

E3: How people narrate pain will reflect their experiences and understandings, organized by inequalities over the life course.

Data Set

To examine inequalities in the origins and experiences of pain in the contemporary United States, this article draws on data from more than 1,500 in-depth interview transcripts collected as part of the American Voices Project between 2019 and 2021. The AVP aims to connect representative sampling, standardized survey measures (that identify subpopulations), and the depth of qualitative interviews at a scale that is well suited for our purposes.[8] Despite the potential upside of a large sample of in-depth interviews, the AVP presents challenges—for example, whether big qualitative data can support epistemically diverse qualitative approaches (Abramson and Gong 2020), whether scope compromises depth (Lareau and Rao 2016), and practically, how to identify, index and analyze narratives without reducing tens of thousands of pages of text to numbers or small subsets of interviews. Our approach to addressing the empirical questions speaks to these methodological challenges.

Analytical Strategy

Our analytical strategy combines traditional qualitative analyses with computational social science (CSS) techniques (that is, computational ethnography). Such a combination offers a useful approach for big qualitative datasets such as AVP (Abramson et al. 2018; Li and Abramson 2024). Computational analyses can help identify and visualize broad patterns in human subject data such as interviewee speech and field observations (Abramson and Dohan 2015). In particular, machine learning provides a toolkit for identifying text around a concept such as pain and can be deployed in a way consistent with iterative qualitative analyses (Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021). Visualizations help identify broad patterns and situate specific narratives (Abramson et al. 2018).[9]

A mixed-methods analysis answers our questions more thoroughly than a single-method approach by triangulating findings, providing complementary evidence, and connecting levels of analysis (Abramson et al. 2018; Du Bois 1899; Small 2011). We proceeded in six chronological phases:

7. We use the term expectations rather than hypotheses given conventions for discussing qualitative data, but these propositions are consistent with the concept of a hypothesis in the broader sense of expected outcomes, which can be evaluated in non-arbitrary ways. The necessary caveat is that regardless of language, all such inquiry is bound by human and technical limits, so our analysis speaks to the plausibility of these expectations rather than providing definitive confirmation or falsification. This maps on to a broadly fallibilist approach to human inquiry with affinities to the Bayesian approaches, computational social science, and an iterative approach to realist inquiry that underpins our work (see Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski 2020; Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson 2020).

8. The data set is described at length in the introduction to this volume (Edin et al. 2024, this issue).

9. Although this approach has its origins in goals of "scaling up" qualitative methods to support large comparative qualitative projects and reveal patterns, it has parallels with CSS approaches that scale down big data to examine qualitative narratives alongside patterns (DiMaggio 2015; Nelson et al. 2021; Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2023; Breiger 2015; Sauder, Shi, and Lynn 2024, this issue; Zilberstein et al. 2024, this issue; Chu and Lee 2024, this issue).

1. pilot reading of a sample of full interviews;
2. using machine learning to identify segments of interview transcripts on pain;
3. creating semantic networks to visualize language patterns;
4. in-depth readings of all text discussing pain, and a subsample of full interviews;
5. identifying overlapping themes in the networks and narratives; and
6. repeating to identify similarity and difference within and between categories of respondents.

For step 6, we used individual attributes recorded in the survey questions connected to the AVP interviews to divide respondents into subgroups. We focused on criteria central to prior literature on how inequality shapes experiences of pain (gender identity and educational attainment). These categories were selected because they are analytically important and provided adequate volumes of text for both qualitative and computational analyses.[10] This does not suggest that these are taken to be the only, or even the most important, categories; our methods do not allow us to make such a determination but rather to show similarity and difference in categories established to be important in extant works.

ANALYZING INTERVIEWS IN AVP'S BIG QUALITATIVE DATA

One of the first challenges in analyzing a large-scale, multipurpose qualitative dataset is identifying textual data relevant to new research questions (Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021). Computational social scientists often begin by searching the text with a predefined dictionary (a list of keywords, including synonyms for the construct of interest). However, even when the literature guides the selection of keywords, researchers' existing dictionaries may miss novel or nuanced ways in which people talk about a concept of interest (such as pain). Although this may be framed as an advantage for some approaches, qualitative research often seeks to make sense of this type of variation (Abramson and Gong 2020). To address this challenge, we cast a wide net and used human review to minimize the exclusion of relevant text on initial passes and the inclusion of irrelevant text subsequently (Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021; Sánchez-Jankowski 2002).

We used Word2Vec in Python (a programming language used in CSS) to inductively identify words that respondents use to talk about pain. Word2Vec is a class of unsupervised machine learning models that can be trained on large corpora of text to obtain high-dimensional vector representations of words in a vector space where words that are used in the same contexts or analogically are clustered together (Mikolov, Chen, et al. 2013). Sociologists have taken advantage of Word2Vec to map semantic similarities and analogies among words in a variety of sociolinguistic contexts (Arseniev-Koehler et al. 2022; Arseniev-Koehler and Foster 2020; Garg et al. 2018; Kozlowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019; Stoltz and Taylor 2021). By quantifying this relational structure of meaning, Word2Vec's word embedding models are able to inductively discover not just text that contains the word *pain*, but also other words people use when they talk about pain, and which traditional dictionary-based methods struggle to detect.

We trained Word2Vec models on all respondents' speech, excluding interviewers and other nonspeech information, and inductively identified the twenty seed words that were most synonymous, analogical, or closely re-

10. Even with oversampling, racial-ethnic group focused analyses, which also map on well to literatures we engage with, created challenges for modeling networks due to sub-sample size limitations. We also recognize simplified operationalizations of education and gender do violence to the complexity of the underlying concepts, but some compression was necessary to allow comparability given limits on the methodological and technical tools available to us at the time of writing. We address this by using these categorizations not as definitive individual attributes, but as a broad basis allowing some aggregate comparison between qualitative sets or corpi of text. Narratives were not reduced to these criteria, and relevant quotes that did not fit neatly into categorizations were evaluated separately insofar as they relate to our broader research questions.

lated to the word *pain* in this particular dataset.[11] We then used these seed words to extract the paragraphs in which respondents talked about pain and pain-related experiences. We obtained 5,852 paragraphs that potentially contained pain narratives and used this reduced dataset as the basis for our computational analysis.

Thematic Networks

Another challenge in analyzing a large amount of text is that respondents talk about concepts of interest at multiple levels and in a variety of contexts. This maps on to a challenge in sociological theory, where scholars of culture argue that it is necessary to look both at articulated narratives and underlying language patterns connected to how we filter. Theories of culture have noted that people often filter experience through cognitive schema or habitus (D'Andrade 1992; Leschziner and Brett 2021), but articulate understandings as narratives and justifications (Vaisey 2009). In connecting these, Margaret Frye notes, "People make sense of the world by consciously deploying collective narratives. . . . Collective narratives put flesh around the bones of cultural schemas [more basic symbolic structures], specifying symbolic events or character traits that elucidate schematic associations between attributes and outcomes" (2017, 948).

Our empirical approach aims to use computational analyses of natural language, and qualitative analyses of narratives, to connect these levels of culture. In our analysis, networks represent core language patterns and building blocks that help support and situate themes in respondents' narratives. These networks provide a useful starting point for subsequent qualitative analysis aimed at identifying and interpreting cultural schemas.

We used semantic network analysis to detect and model thematic structures. Topic models are also popular tools for exploring themes in large-scale qualitative datasets. However, topic models provided limited insights for our specific project in pilot analyses, perhaps because of their reliance on high-frequency words and vulnerability to stop words. Instead of relying on the frequency of single words, semantic network analysis allowed us to examine the co-occurrence of word pairs: how often and how rarely two words are used in the same context to describe pain-related experiences. From the semantic network view of a narrative, words appear as nodes. Words frequently used together will be connected by an edge weighted by the frequency of co-occurrence; words that are not used together will appear unconnected. The contrast between the presence and absence of edges helps us identify clusters—sets of words that are densely connected to each other, but relatively disconnected from other words—pointing to distinct thematic structures underlying narratives. By explicitly modeling not only the high-frequency but also the low-frequency word pairs, semantic networks are well suited to robust analyses alongside the linguistic noise of interview transcripts. Sociologists have used word co-occurrence networks to explore the thematic structure of other forms of text in wide-ranging inquiries (Carley 1994; Rule, Cointet, and Bearman 2015; Hoffman et al. 2018; Basov 2020; Basov, de Nooy, and Nenko 2021; Padgett et al. 2020).

Once we obtained a baseline network, we visualized its core structure to identify and interpret the distinct thematic contexts in which pain was discussed. Because the resulting thematic network was large and dense, we pruned the network to preserve the robust thematic structure while enabling readability. Our goal was to show enough context words in a thematic cluster for it to be meaningful while revealing boundaries between distinct thematic clusters and highlighting relationships between them. Although this optimization pro-

11. Seed words include ibuprofen, herniate, oxycodone, hydrocodone, discomfort, painkiller, morphine, stimulator, curvature, anesthetic, oxycontin, sciatica, spine, sciatic, cedar, inflammatory, ache, vertebra, spinal, and cortisone, with a cosine similarity to pain ranging from 0.444 to 0.353. As we describe later, we compressed pain medication into opioid and non-opioid varieties using a medical dictionary list. It is possible that there are some false positives, but these were weeded out manually for qualitative analysis as discussed in (Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021).

cess was qualitative and iterative, we tested a wide range of pruning hyperparameters to determine the extent to which different specifications of the network affected the results.

A third challenge in analyzing large-scale qualitative data is that the distribution of narratives often does not correspond to the distribution of demographic groups. For example, consistent with existing literature (Bendelow 1993), we found that those identifying as women talked more about pain and pain-related experiences than men. We also observed unbalanced distributions of narratives across racial-ethnic groups, educational levels, income levels, and geographic locations. Although quantitative variables in an unbalanced sample can be easily reweighted to approach distributions in the population, narratives cannot. Focusing only on the core structure of a given size controls for unbalanced distributions to a certain extent; we also use semantic network analysis to contextualize qualitative analysis.

Stop Words and Sensitivity Tests

Stopwords present a challenge to the intelligibility of semantic networks. These are words such as *the*, *a*, *by*, *for*, and *and*, which are so common in English that they carry little semantic information relative to the noise they add to the model. Although Word2Vec models typically do not require the removal of stopwords, given the large amount of filler words in oral language, we focus our attention on only nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and manually remove some specifically functional words used by transcribers such as *inaudible* and *personalname*. *Personalname*, which refers to the redacted name of a person, is relevant. However, in practice these names co-occurred with role words *daughter*, *husband*, *doctor*, or referenced the interviewer. Therefore, for our networks, we removed *personalname* from node visualization, but retained the role words. We also excluded the word *ass* as a stopword because there are mentions of the colloquial phrase "pain in the ass," which is analytically distinct from talking about pain as physical or mental suffering. We consider this a reasonable trade-off, given our aims, it reflects the interview context and is not fully natural language based on unprompted conversations. Furthermore, a subset of interviews were conducted in languages other than English and then translated. Even though the translations likely capture information on the core concepts needed for our analyses, some valences may have been lost.

In sensitivity tests, we found including all words in the Word2Vec model did not significantly change which words are identified by the model as synonyms or closely related to *pain*. We also included highly frequent bigrams—phrases that consist of two consecutive words, such as *mental health*, *medical bill*, and *heart attack*—but none of these bigrams is frequent enough to appear in the network. We used *pain* and twenty other words that Word2Vec identifies as most similar to *pain* as seed words to generate a corpus of text in which Americans are talking about pain. We then extracted co-occurring word pairs from a twenty-word context of each occurrence of any of the seed words in all interviewee speeches. Using a six-word or full-sentence context did not fundamentally alter the structure of networks. To optimize interpretability without losing information on core semantic structures, we pruned the network by keeping the top 0.1 percent of the most frequent word pairs and the top fifty most central words by node betweenness. These thresholds reflect the interpretive aspects of CSS analyses completed alongside our in-depth reading of the text. In other words, they are not purely mechanical by design, mirroring an iterative and interpretive logic. Further, rigidly mechanistic approaches pose a different risk in itself for interpreting computational models (Chang et al. 2009) and producing ecologically valid accounts more broadly (Cicourel 1982). Notably, verbal patterns are consistent with our model, visual configurations, and our interpretative analysis of the text (subsequently reproduced in reanalysis by another team).

To construct subnetworks, we subset the text based on respondent demographic characteristics including education level and gender identity. As noted, these groups were selected because of both analytical importance and practical limitations around weighting text and subsetting data unbalanced in size between groups.

Narrative Analysis

Our qualitative analysis is grounded in a contemporary iterative approach that examines themes both deductively, based on prior work and expectations, and inductively, based on emerging patterns (Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski 2020; Deterding and Waters 2021; Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2023). After aggregating relevant paragraphs in Python, we also used the query function in NVIVO, a contemporary computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program, to cross-tabulate narratives.[12] Central to our analysis, our in-depth reading focused on identifying similarities and differences in individual and group narratives as comparative qualitative logic rather than a basis for statistical generalizations (Abramson and Gong 2020). Connecting narrative sets and weights for population estimates was not feasible for this study.

To identify qualitative themes, we used paragraphs as the unit of analysis, exporting paragraphs in which the word *pain* appeared from NVIVO into text documents to limit performance bottlenecks experienced on the AVP server. Paragraph-level analysis is common in qualitative analyses, particularly computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, and can provide important context while limiting false positives, as in using full interviews, or false negatives, as in words or sentences alone, in identifying thematic patterns (Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021). This produced approximately 1,429 pages of text across groups. The exported text was organized by respondent so we could read all paragraphs in which the word *pain* was used for each respondent. This allowed us to see when and how pain was discussed throughout each interview.

Given the quantity of text associated with the number of interviews we analyzed, as well as the range of topics and issues covered by the interviews, we could not holistically read all transcripts in which respondents spoke about pain. However, at the outset of the project we performed a holistic reading of more than twenty random complete transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the flow of the interview questions and themes. In performing our qualitative analysis, where necessary for interpretation we moved back and forth between reading the extracted paragraphs of text and complete transcripts. For instance, when the text was unclear or particularly relevant, we would go back to read more of the interview in NVIVO. For each group, we read all text until new themes related to our research questions no longer appeared, and then kept with our focus on pain due to time limitations and data set size. After reading through, writing memos, and identifying representative or otherwise key quotes for all groups, we triangulated the findings by comparing the patterns of similarity and difference identified through our in-depth narrative reading with those evident in the networks.

Both our network visualizations and narrative analysis played key roles in answering our research questions. The networks help reveal broad patterns and the narratives provide core illustrations of how people discuss their experiences of pain. The themes identified in our narrative reading shape our interpretation of the networks that might otherwise be more vulnerable to misinterpretation (Cicourel 1982); the networks help situate quotations in a broader text sample (Abramson et al. 2018; Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski 2020). Together, the approaches connect pain narratives at the level of both basic language patterns and elaborated accounts, which reveals multifaceted connections between inequality and pain. Core computational and qualitative findings were independently substantiated as part of the qualitative verification project AVP workshop, coordinated by Robey, Karcher, and Elman at Syracuse University.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the number of interviews that include pain narratives in the AVP data by simplified gender and education categories.

The table reveals that discussions of pain

12. This was not ideal because technical issues were associated with the data set size and we had no direct way to link with more advanced language models. This, as well as the weeding out of false positives, accounts for some of the numeric divergences in set sizes. Other CAQDA software became available later in the project, but much of our qualitative analysis was already completed, and no current off-the-shelf software provides an ideal solution.

Table 1. File and Group Reference Frequencies for Qualitative Analysis

Group/Subgroup		Interviews in Category	Interviews Containing Mentions of Pain
All Files		1,613	1,264 (78 percent)
Gender	identifies as female	940	762 (81 percent)
	identifies as male	653	486 (74 percent)
Education	no bachelor's degree		
	bachelor's degree or higher	1,060	829 (78 percent)

Source: Authors' tabulation.

are widespread across groups.[13] Our analyses of content demonstrate that pain is connected to concrete everyday challenges in respondent narratives (E1); that narratives often involve discussions of morality, meaning, and distinction (E2); and that differences by demographic group reflect divergent experiences around disparate medical treatment, identity threats, and how complex traumas create pain (E3).

We begin by examining general patterns before moving on to analyses by education and gender. We focus on education as an aspect that links social advantages, health behavior, and narrative justifications, such as cultural (health) capital (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003; Shim 2010). We then turn to gender as an organizing category that often shapes experiences with pain and how pain is treated or perceived (Barker 2005; Bendelow 1993; Kempner 2014).

Mapping Discussions of Pain in the AVP

Figure 1 presents a semantic network that visualizes the structure of language use across 5852 interview segments discussing pain-related experiences. Each node represents a word situated in the context of other words that appear in pain narratives. The size of the node is proportional to the betweenness centrality of the word in the text segment—the degree to which the coherence of the narrative depends on this particular word. A tie that connects two nodes represents a correlation between a pair of words. Density of ties is proportional to the strength of the correlation between words and themes. Themes are distinguished by their distance from each other. Words were identified computationally, as described above, but color coding reflects a holistic interpretation based on network patterns and in-depth readings of text, which gives us greater confidence that they are not artifacts of computational methods. For instance, the green cluster containing words such as *surgery*, *knee*, *bone*, *neck*, and *walk* references discussions about managing a damaged body, which is both a source of pain and practical challenges observed in both networks and narratives. The clusters are identifiable by grayscale shading, but the full color version is available online (https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/5/34).

13. Interviews with missing data on these core measures were excluded from analysis for this article. Although numbers show variation in the percentage of respondents mentioning pain by gender identity (for example, 81 percent identifying as female versus 74 percent identifying as male), our focus here is demonstrating that discussion of pain occur at high rates across groups, to allowing a comparison of how pain is discussed. In our analysis of interview content, we further specify the number of interview segments (a paragraph of uninterrupted response by the respondent in an interview) for our computational analyses. In the context of our focus on narrative structure and content, the raw number of segments methodologically demonstrates adequate scope for modeling rather than substantively measuring variation in verbosity by gender or education. However, because we are modeling within groups of interviews using methodologies focused on word position within categories of respondent, the observed differences focus on connections unlikely to be fundamentally changed given differences found in research. As noted, for qualitative analyses, our findings rely on a broader human reading of interviews and relevant text.

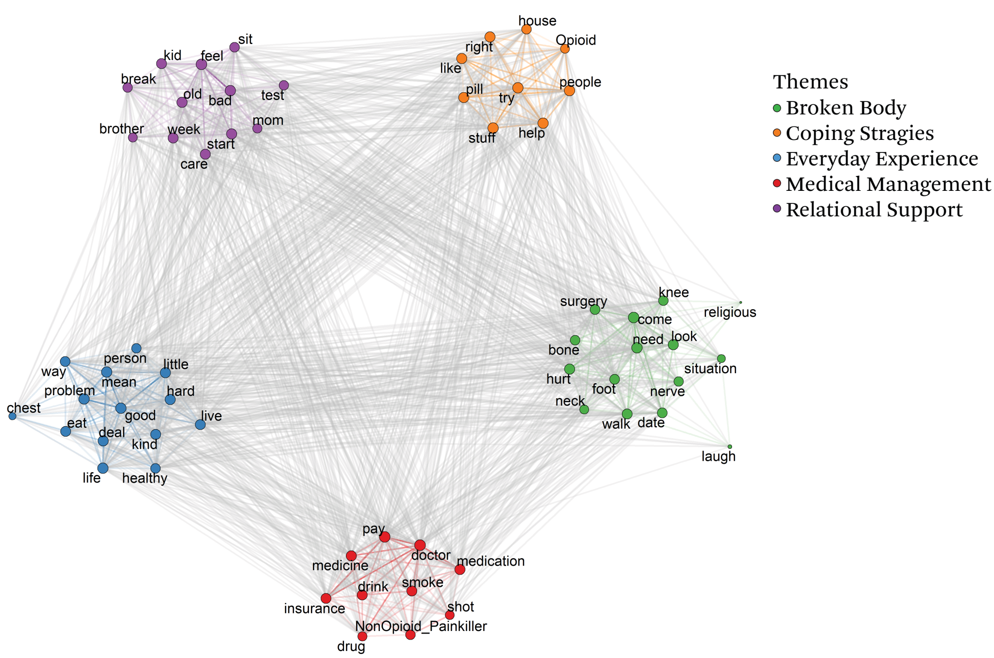
The key themes in figure 1 include medical management (red), coping strategies (orange), broken bodies (green), everyday experiences or feelings (blue), and relational support (purple). This reflects that when asked about their health problems, AVP respondents discussed how pain is felt and experienced in relation to their everyday lives (feelings); how relationships with other people such as family and friends can offer physical, logistical, and emotional support, but might also become a source of tension (relationships); how pain is connected to physical trauma (broken body); everyday coping strategies; and pain's connection to physicians and medical treatments (medical management). These patterns show the core language people use to connect pain to experiences, and in which contexts.

Unpacking Pain Narratives: Pain and Everyday Life

Our narrative analysis reaffirms extant survey data showing pain is prevalent and significant for many Americans (Yong, Mullins, and Bhattacharyya 2022). Even narrow searches for mentions of the word *pain* reveal frequent and wide-reaching discussions of pain in the AVP data. A comment by Juan Carlos illustrates how these discussions often reflect the extent to which pain is part of everyday experience. In discussing what an average day looks like for him, Juan Carlos, who is identified as an Hispanic man working in a low-income job, said, "For me, a typical day is waking up, trying to shake off the lower back pain, it's constant. . . . I'm feeling it right now." In addition to its omnipresence, pain was reported to constrain the kinds of activities people can engage in on a given day. Over time, this limits the lives people are able to lead and shapes how they present themselves in social settings (see also Abramson 2015; Charmaz 2002).

AVP respondents reported that pain, especially chronic pain, influenced their thinking about themselves and their social identity. In a clear example of this broader pattern, Dan, a young college-educated white man, said, "The biggest issue was how I had been feeling within the past year was the fact that I was not able to continue the same lifestyle that I like or want

Figure 1. Baseline Semantic Network of Pain Discussions in AVP Data



Source: Authors' tabulation.

because of my injury and the amount of pain that I was in. That had a big frustration on who I am as a person, who I've seemed to become." Like many, Dan reaffirms how pain becomes an organizing aspect of life and identity.

Many AVP respondents described seeking medical care, where they approached health-care providers who facilitated surgeries, prescribed painkillers, or ruled out these treatments. Others sought alternative treatments such as marijuana, alcohol, exercise, and mindfulness or meditation to dull pain either in lieu of or alongside medical management. The coping strategies people deployed shaped their schedules (medical engagement is time-consuming), molded their sense of self (pain can limit activities), and influenced their relationships. This is seen most clearly in management strategies that involve the persistent use of narcotic pain medication or other often-stigmatized strategies, which were invoked alongside discussions of challenging life trajectories.

Challenging Life Trajectories, Narcotics, and Stigma

How respondents framed the use of narcotic pain medications was revealing. One comment by Jim, a middle-aged white man who had attended some college but did not have a college degree, illustrates how respondents connected life challenges, pain coping strategies, and negative outcomes as part of a challenging life trajectory narrative. For Jim, the use of narcotic fentanyl to manage chronic pain developed into addiction and added to other challenges in his marriage and life. When asked how he had come to live at his current address, Jim connected his trajectory to pain and addiction, which contributed to separation from his wife:

> [my ex-wife] who I was going to grow old and fat with. I got old and fat, but not with her. We just, it just went off the rails. I have chronic pain, had it since the 90s. So, I spent over a decade on fentanyl. Toward the end I was getting tired of it simply because with the narcotic aspect, you can see, you know, where addiction could start to play a factor. . . we got to the point where we were, she said, I love you, but I can't live with you anymore.

The issue for Jim was not that pain or addiction was the sole cause of his troubles. Instead, his story illustrates a trajectory in which chronic pain intersects with broader challenges, adaptations (taking narcotics), complications (addiction), and ultimately further disruption.

Given the stigma associated with the use of opioids, discussions of strategies involving the use of pain medications often invoked distinctions between so-called abusers and those who were able to avoid medication or use it in a way that limits harmful physical effects (such as bodily damage) or social effects (such as stigma, threats to identity). People who admitted to using narcotic pain medications often emphasized their efforts to minimize negative effects while further emphasizing that their use is legitimate and limited. As Shonda, an older black woman, told the interviewer, "if I'm having back pain that day or something, and it's too excruciating, I go get me some pain pills and I'll take them for that particular day. But for every day taking pain pills, uh-uh. I'm not fixing to do it. I'm not fixing to kill my kidneys and my other organs taking stuff. I'm not a pill taker. I don't like taking pills. Never have, and I never will. If I don't have to take it, I'm not taking it."

Leanne, a middle-aged white woman, likened persistent use of opioids to heroin. When asked by her AVP interviewer whether she ever coped by relying on prescriptions, pain medications, marijuana, or other substances, Leanne replied, "Never taken any of it in my life, pain medication when I had C sections, obviously, but see all these people getting addicted to heroin and, yeah, no thank you."

Even those who used other sometimes stigmatized strategies, such as marijuana, were careful to separate themselves from the specter of opioid abuse. For example, a college-educated black man named Marcellus noted, "One of the problems that I've had, I've smoked marijuana. One thing I don't do is take pain pills because I've saw what it does to a lot of people that I've known." In this statement, Marcellus draws a boundary between his choice of coping mechanism, which he sees as a potential problem, and the even more dangerous strategy of using prescription pain medication. A key finding was that respondents from all backgrounds described pain management in terms of physical concerns but also as a moral event, with implications for identity and distinction (Abramson 2015; Werner, Isaksen, and Malterud 2004).

Mapping Discussions of Pain in the AVP: Educational Differences

We now turn to how differences in social advantages manifest in our sample. Our qualitative and semantic network analyses revealed that although pain affected daily life for Americans of all backgrounds, pain and resources for responding to it reflect broader inequities. We begin by analyzing subnarrative networks to explore the correlations between social position, educational attainment, and narrative structure. Figures 2 and 3 present a comparison of pain narratives between respondents with a four-year college degree, and those who do not have a college degree.[14] Once again, color and shading indicate the leading theme in each of the clusters, and node sizes indicate the centrality or relative importance of a specific word in the overall narrative.

Overall, the subnetwork of respondents with four-year or advanced college degrees showed a more centralized structure around the medical management of pain. This suggests, as we would expect, skill in elaborating medicalized narratives. Discussions on medicalization are prominent even when discussing coping with pain outside of the hospital and clinical settings. For example, *medication*, *surgery*, *insurance*, and *doctor* are among the most central words used by highly educated respondents. Opioids are less central in these narratives and are routinized as part of everyday coping (as an orange node).

In contrast, among those without four-year degrees medical terms are dispersed across themes such as coping strategies (orange), experience or feeling (blue), and broken bodies (green). This mirrors discussions of pragmatic and often more dispersed strategies central in the narratives of respondents. For instance, opioids and doctors are grouped alongside nonmedical coping strategies (orange), and surgery is connected to physical breakdown (green) in a way that differs from those with higher levels of education. Second, the connection between illness and relationships (purple) is pronounced in the networks and connected to language about disease, mirroring our qualitative analysis showing that how pain affected roles was a concern and challenge for respondents.

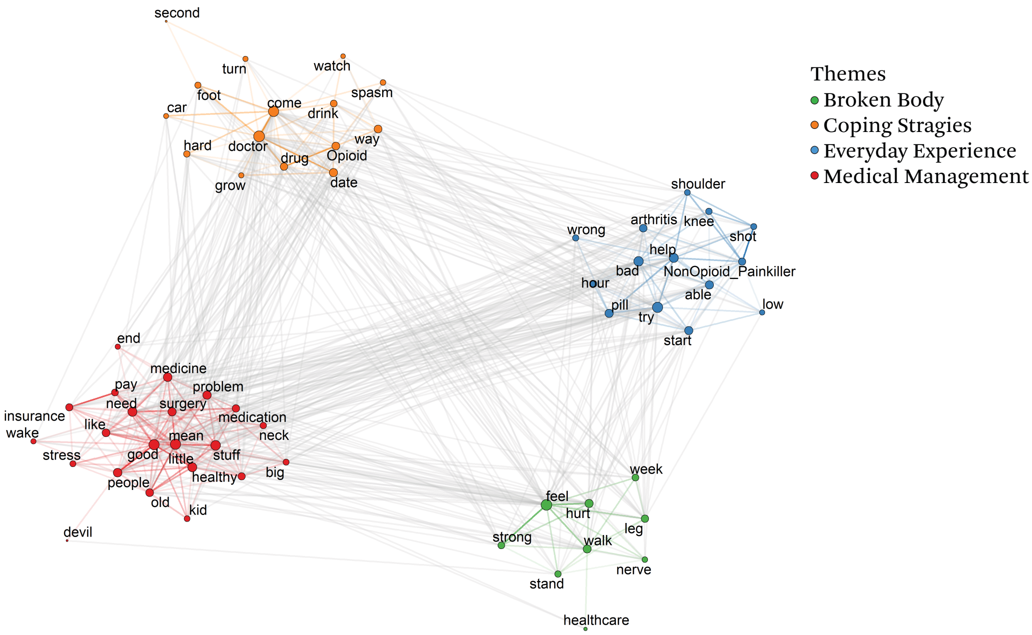
Our qualitative analysis confirms and further articulates this division between medicalization and coping as a central organizing theme in Americans' experiences of pain, as well as the differential effect on social roles, which resurfaces in our discussion of gender.

Unpacking Pain Narratives: Origins, Capital and Contestation

In-depth qualitative analysis by education revealed variations in the origins and experiences of pain, as well as the cultural narratives used to describe it. Respondents with less education often referred to medical providers, conditions, and treatments in general terms. For example, respondents used descriptions such as "my bones hurt" rather than medical terms (for example, "arthritis"). In a representative example, Elisa, a low-income woman who had not completed high school, spoke about experiences with sciatic nerve pain by saying, "They said it's the largest nerve people have on the left side of the body, and sometimes it becomes swollen, and when it's swollen, that's when you have very strong pain. But they said there isn't any medication for that." In contrast, Americans with at least a bachelor's degree often used precise medical terminology. They described medical providers in specific terms, referring to their *gastroenterologist* or *orthopedist*, and explained their own experiences using

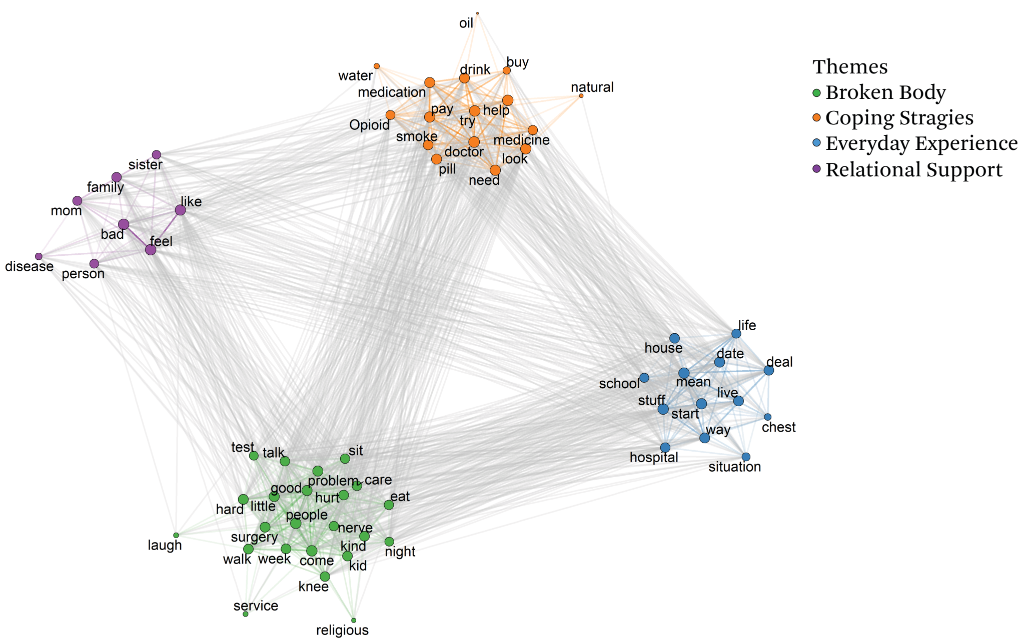
14. Our justifications and methodological reasons for compressing categories are discussed in the methods section. We recognize that these categories do not capture all important variation, but provide a starting point for analytical comparisons, presented alongside our more detailed qualitative analyses. In this case, the strategy provides adequate set size for comparisons of language patterms, maps on to a key component of class and cultural health capital (Shim 2010), and has been documented as an important source of distinction for both individuals and institutions. This also mirrors key variation that emerged inductively in our qualitative analysis.

Figure 2. Semantic Network of Pain Discussions in AVP Data by Education, Four-Year College Degree or Higher



Source: Authors' tabulation.

Figure 3. Semantic Network of Pain Discussions in AVP Data by Education, No Four-Year College Degree



Source: Authors' tabulation.

terms such as *angioplasty*, *ablation*, and *endoscopy*. This reflects a domain-specific form of cultural capital that people may draw on to understand, explain, and justify their experiences in ways that reinforce social advantages or disadvantages. It is also a form of language validated through interactions with providers and institutions from whom they seek care or resources for coping (Shim 2010; Abramson 2015).

Respondent narratives also revealed differences in the espoused causes and nature of pain itself. Dental pain was a major theme for all except for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. This likely reflects disparities in oral health and the fact that dental insurance is often a "luxury" item in American health care. On the other hand, discussions of injuries from travel and vacations mostly appeared in the narratives of people with college degrees. Trauma and violence, aspects of precarity to which those in lower socioeconomic groups are disproportionately exposed, were particularly pronounced in the narratives of those with less than a high school education. Those without a high school degree shared stories about contending with the unequally distributed risk of experiencing pain because of assault, abuse, losing a family member to murder, or spending time in prison.

Divergent positions and life experiences mapped onto the ways respondents drew distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate narcotic use. For example, Isaac, a middle-aged white man with a college degree, explained it this way:

> When you say, "use pain medication," the only pain medication she [subject's spouse] ever uses is anything that's prescribed by a physician. . . . What my wife probably should be getting to help her cope with her chronic [disease], she's not getting. And the big reason for that is because of what society has done with the term pain medication. To me, it's all been caused by people cheating the system. People getting prescriptions, selling on the pavements and getting it in the open market. And, of course, consequently, we have an epidemic, and that's how it started, anyway. Now, it's we have an epidemic and everybody is so closely scrutinized, including physicians.

In this statement, Isaac connects perceived social problems (limited opportunities for pain management and perceived cheating of the system), his view of the moral failings of individuals (who take advantage), and a perceived innocent's suffering (Isaac's wife) to construct a narrative of blame and victimization. Isaac draws on classic tropes of deservingness and legitimation that are widespread in American ideology and policy and employed by institutional actors as well as members of the public (Patterson 2000; Anderson 1999; Foster et al. 2023; Mohr and Duquenne 1997; Sánchez-Jankowski 2008; Wacquant 2022).

By contrast, those with less than a college education spoke openly with interviewers about struggles, addiction, violence, and complexities within their families and communities. Like peers with higher levels of education, their narratives often involved "boundary work" (Lamont 2000) to draw distinctions around which avenues of pain relief were legitimate. However, their accounts focused on direct examples of complexities rather than hypotheticals. For example, an older white man named Tom answered a question about whether he had ever used marijuana or prescription pills to cope with pain, saying, "Don't like drugs, hate them. I've seen what it had done to our mother. The only drugs I take is this, my prescription. And I need to take, I don't take anything that I'm not supposed to take. And even with the pain meds I have, it says, every four hours or when needed. I make sure I stretch it out to that four hours, and sometimes longer because I don't want to get dependent on that." He explains why his behavior is in accordance with the ideals of methodical sobriety. This finding follows research showing how people use their responses to health challenges to draw distinctions and present their own strategies as honorable in light of what they see as the most (or only) respectable solution to a challenge (Abramson 2015).

Pain Is Part of the Job

The narratives we analyzed also revealed connections between pain and workforce participation in ways that varied by education and reflect other aspects of social class such as occupation and income. For respondents with college degrees, computer-related injuries or work stress were often identified as the causes of pain. As a young college-educated black man named Phil noted, "one thing I will say is that I've experienced more lower back pain, which is due to constantly sitting down and working on the computer. To counteract that, I try to do those walks as much as possible to loosen up my back, but that's really it, you know, nothing crazy." For those with less education, occupational injuries tended to be associated with manual labor jobs and were often compounded over time. For instance, in explaining how she came to be on disability, Gloria, a woman who had worked in a manual occupation and did not have a high school degree, said this:

> Now, when I worked in [organization], I left there in the mid-90s. I left because I got a back injury and the judge gave me disability in my back. . . . I went to [place], worked there. . . . This ladder fell . . . and hit me on my shoulder. Well, I'm not knowing that it had damaged some bone and, hell, I just kept working. And every now and then I would get this pain, but I wouldn't pay it no mind. But when I went to [organization], the kind of work we was doing, dusting . . . and pulling trash, I started having this terrible pain. And I end up getting surgery on my shoulder.

After recounting the story, Gloria explained to the interviewer that it took six years for disability payments to begin. During that time, she had to continue working to stay afloat. Being able to stop laboring to address this issue was an untenable luxury.

The coping strategies of those with less education were often shaped by occupational precarity and the need to endure pain for survival. Juan Carlos, a low-income respondent who does not have a high school degree, was representative in saying,

> When it first started happening to me, I ignored it [the pain] for over a year to tell you the truth. I ignored it for a year because I had to work. I had to make my money. I had bills I had to pay. I didn't have time to be sick and so, I noticed like my [redacted] leg started hurting and it kept hurting until one day [it] was like four days later after the pain started, I reached out for something and I just felt a rip in my leg, but I guess the muscle or tendon or something ripped and it was painful then I chilled, relaxed.

For Juan Carlos and others in his position, pain is common but often not practically actionable until the body itself is broken by labor. In labor generally, and manual occupations in particular, pain was framed as part of the job. This was reflected in how respondents from lower socioeconomic strata matter-of-factly framed pain as just a part of life, work, and identity.

Respondents with higher education levels expressed less matter-of-factness and more contestation. Their narratives also emphasized efficacy in encounters with medical providers. In recounting an interaction with a doctor, Fred shared,

> I said, "No, you're not putting a needle in my back, we're not doing none of that." I've seen people get that done and they crippled now, so no, I'm not interested." He said, "All right, then we can put you on pain pills," so I said, "Okay. All right, give me the pain pills, but give me some education along with it because I don't want to get hooked on these things," because I know a lot of people that went from them pills to dope.

Fred's comment invokes a perennial distinction between those who are credible and those who are part of a dubious moral category subject to addiction. Fred also likely leveraged his cultural health capital in navigating a healthcare system beset by inequalities.

Gender and Pain

Like education, gender was a significant source of variation in how respondents experienced and made sense of pain. The accounts of female interviewees posited that women's experiences of pain are often not taken seriously, and that the health conditions that disproportionately affect them are trivialized (see also Barker 2005; Kempner 2014). At the same time, both men and women suggested that women have more capacity to endure pain (Bendelow 1993).

Similarly, both believed that men were generally more actively discouraged from expressing pain (see also Bendelow 1993; Jaworska and Ryan 2018). Further, AVP narratives highlighted that men often experience chronic pain as a threat to their status and identity (see also Courtenay 2000; Charmaz 1994). Respondents often drew connections between pain and sacrifice, albeit in ways that reflected gendered norms.

Mapping Gender and Pain Narratives

Figures 4 and 5 present semantic networks by respondent gender. The thematic structure of gender subnetworks is interesting in two ways. First, men's accounts of pain are heavily bifurcated between talking about pain as part of everyday life and social relationships (in purple), and talking about pain as a medical diagnosis (in red). By contrast, women's accounts of pain use a broader, decentralized network. Second, men often pinpoint specific locations in their body as the source of pain (neck, arm, knee, leg, foot, and bone), whereas women describe pain as being more generalized.

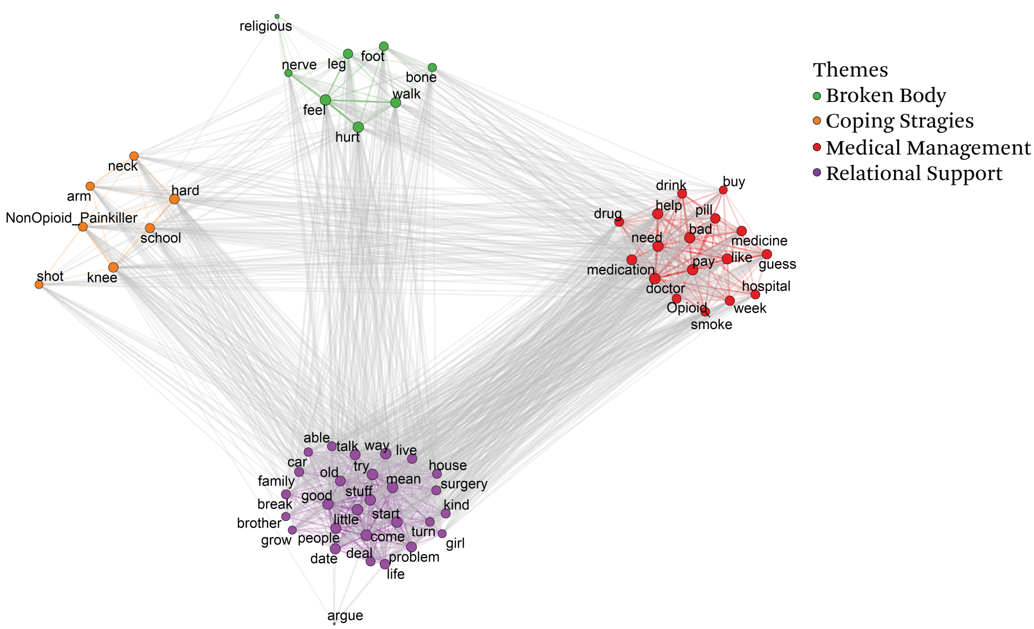
These gendered differences are connected to narratives of disparities, which mirror scholarly accounts of the historical barriers women face in getting medical professionals to believe their suffering is real and legitimate. Our qualitative analysis supports the hypothesis that women might have turned to individual coping strategies as a result of their struggles to establish credibility in interactions with health-care providers, as well as with family and colleagues, which they connected to the belief that their pain and suffering were not taken seriously.

Unpacking Pain Narratives: Unequal Treatment, Sacrifice, and Identity

Women's accounts highlighted their perceptions of being dismissed and mis- or inadequately treated for pain and health issues. Eleanor, a retired white woman, provided a poignant illustration related to a health problem affecting women:

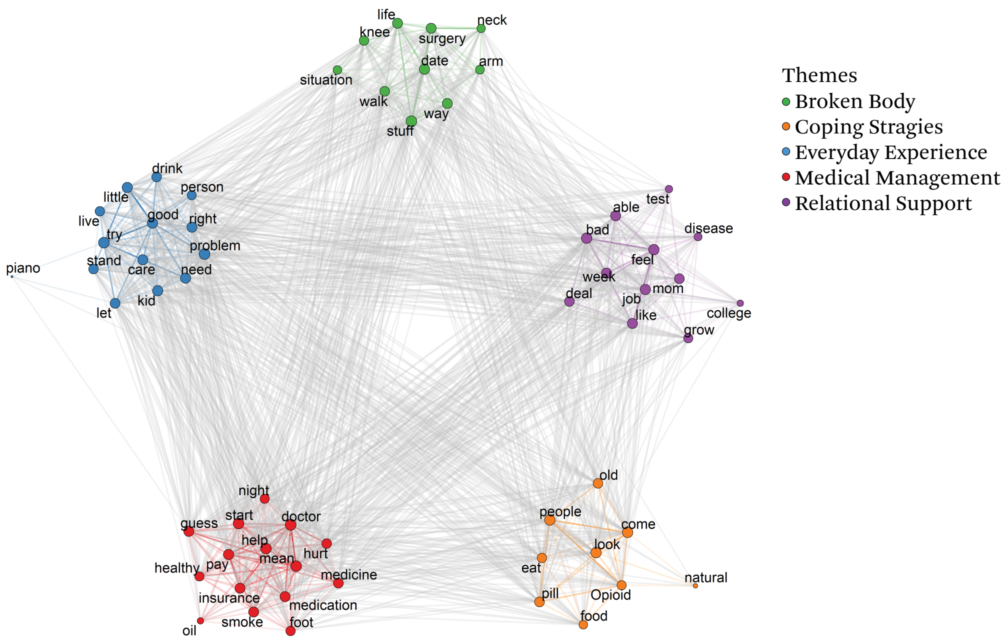
> I've had female problems and it's like I would call, they [providers] would say, okay, go get this over the counter, try this and I try that and it wouldn't go away. So then call back and say, "Oh no, don't use that one. Use this one, go get this one." So, I'd run back out to the

Figure 4. Semantic Network of Pain Discussions in AVP Data by Gender Identity, Male



Source: Authors' tabulation.

Figure 5. Semantic Network of Pain Discussions in AVP Data by Gender Identity, Female



Source: Authors' tabulation.

> store and get the other medication and try that a couple of days later it's not getting better. . . . It was like, this is ridiculous. I'm in pain here. I need to do something I need to be looked at. It needs to be examined.

Eleanor's account emphasizes that she felt that medical providers did not take her pain seriously (Barker 2005; Kempner 2014). This reflects the challenge women have in establishing credibility with medical providers and being seen as trustworthy narrators of their experience (Schäfer et al. 2016; Wright 2018). These feelings of being dismissed and improperly cared for were pervasive in women's narratives and crossed racial as well as educational categories.

Pain, Caregiving and Sacrifice

Our narrative analysis also revealed the ways in which pain and pain management are framed as axes of distinction but in ways that reflect gendered expectations and ideologies (Kempner 2006). For example, caregiving responsibilities, prioritization of family, and associated self-sacrifice frequently came up in women's discussions of pain management. For example, Imani, a young black woman with a high school degree, explained that she sacrificed effectively managing her own pain to support her partner:

> So it's like, well, you can get it you can get twenty pills right now, even though he needs like 120. So I'll skip my medications because his [chronic disease] and he's had it for quite some time. And you can see the deterioration that has happened [across] the months and years. So the way I looked at it, he needs his medication more than I do, so I'll only get the one I need for swelling or inflammation, so it'll kind of help with the pain, it'll make it bearable, but I'll be able to actually at least function, I want to make sure he has his pain pills, and he has what he needs for his blood, everything.

The narratives highlighted a variety of ways in which women made sacrifices to care for loved ones in their social networks, as clearly articulated here. This suggests one way women's disproportionate burden as "family health managers" (Melander 2023; Ranji and Salganicoff 2014; Reczek and Umberson 2012; Reczek, Gebhardt-Kram, and Umberson 2018; Reczek et al. 2020) and gendered logics affecting the experience of pain (Melander 2023) may be linked.

Women's comments about pushing through discomfort connected to caregiving obligations and sacrificing for family. As Cristina said, "It hurts because sometimes I feel bad and I do things so that everyone will feel fine. And maybe they recognize it but they won't tell me. So that makes me upset. It upsets me because I'm making a sacrifice, I'm feeling bad, and I'm not doing my stuff." Cristina's comment reflects feelings of being unappreciated and yet unable to change the dynamics or step away from the taken-for-granted responsibilities and identity of being a primary caregiver for a household.

Gendered expectations around caregiving also came up in stories about pain interfering with women's ability to keep up with housework (see also Paxman 2021). Whereas men in their stories often focused on paid employment, women spoke about pain in terms of how it limited their ability to cook, clean, and go grocery shopping—as part of a second shift of unpaid household labor (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Melanie, a middle-aged white woman with a college degree, related, "Sometimes I am just in such pain or I'm in bed and so I can't do things like make dinner or go get groceries or the normal sort of care giving things and that my husband and my son who lived with me have to take on that responsibility and take care of me as well when I'm in those sorts of—when I'm having those days or those periods." This concern was generally absent from men's accounts, as were discussions about caregiving responsibilities.

Masculine Ideals and Identity Threats

In contrast to women's accounts of caregiving and sacrifice, men's narratives emphasized toughness and conquering pain. For example, Jorge spoke about how he dealt with a painful injury saying, "No, no, that doesn't get in the way for me at all. I mean, even yesterday I just tie[d] up my arm and bring a ton of concrete to the dump yard and use just one arm to get rid of it. . . . Even though I have a broken bone I just tie it up and go anyways and just try to reduce the pain. I don't know. Pain is not going to slow me down, sickness is not going to slow me down, Coronavirus doesn't scare me." Ignoring pain was narrated as a means by which honor and male identity could be reasserted (see also Robinson et al. 2001). In another example, Peter remarked, "You know, I said, I've felt neck pain and back pain for twenty years. I said, I just don't say anything about it. I take ibuprofen and I move on." Extended periods of pain also seemed to be experienced as a threat to men's identity and sense of self (Charmaz 1994) in a way that did not clearly manifest in women's narratives. This is evident in Dan's lament, that chronic pain shaped "who I've seemed to become."

Avoidance of help-seeking was another common theme in men's narratives (Keogh 2015). Men generally did not provide any explanation as to why they would not seek medical help when experiencing acute or chronic pain. Gustavo illustrated this by recounting how he responded to an injury and its consequences. He explained, "I did not go to the hospital. I treat it [shoulder injury] myself at the house. I remember I was skinny because I could not sleep due to the pain. No matter how I position myself at night the shoulder hurt. It hurt in every way I moved it so I lost my job." Gustavo is a middle-aged Hispanic man who was working in a low-wage job at the time of his AVP interview. His decision to forgo medical care is stated matter-of-factly, demonstrating another way in which gendered expectations of self-reliance and stoicism are normalized and idealized. As Edward, an older white man, added, "I don't go whine around for every ache and pain. It's part of living and [living], is part of dying."

Intersecting Precarity

Some accounts of pain connected to intersecting vulnerabilities such as class, race, gender, and age (Newman 2004; Collins 2002); sometimes as part of a challenging life trajectory narrative. For instance, a low-income Hispanic woman named Mariana shared the following account, connecting pain, childbirth, and institutional treatment: "I felt that it was coming out and a nurse was passing by, and I said to her. 'Oh, excuse me, I need to be checked because I feel that I am relieving.' And she says, 'I'm telling a nurse now.' 'Oh, please, I feel it. What's more, check me out, please check on me.' I am so shameful and that day I was telling her that." This echoes generations of research showing how poor experiences with health-care providers, concerns about disempowerment, and disparate treatment are a fact of life for Americans from the lower classes, women, and people of color.

Although the general patterns discussed in this article are consistent over the years of data collection, the challenges of the COVID era revealed hard choices and vulnerability. Joaquin, a Hispanic man with some college education, described how COVID-19 exacerbated the downstream effects of policy, the necessity of work, and the costs of illness:

> And so pretty much I'm paying all this money for health care, which is mandatory by the way, especially in my state, I'm paying this for nothing, because I can't even see my fucking doctor excuse my French, so I'm working in pain. And then my boss, I tell him, hey, I have to take one day off my foot is swollen. And legitimately he asked me have you seen the doctor, in order for me to get short-term disability or short-term leave, which I also need insurance for through my job, you have to see a doctor and be given a referral, and I can't even see a doctor because the health care right now is down because of the limited quantities of space that they have. I'm kind of fucked over because of the pandemic I'm in a position where I'm just hurting myself, especially being an essential worker, it's just hurting me. Unfortunately, I just have to live with it for now, I guess.

This statement, like many of the others, illustrates how pain narratives reveal complex inequalities shaping the social organization of suffering, revealed and exacerbated by the stressors of the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Our findings are consistent with expectations that pain creates challenges and disruptions for Americans from varied backgrounds, that pain narratives invoke moral assessments of different response strategies, and that the content of narratives vary by gender and education in ways that reveal divergent experiences and challenges. Triangulating extant findings through a multimethod analysis is an important goal of this article (as well as open qualitative social science). Our findings also offer broader contributions to social scientific explanations that connect inequality to experience, research methodology, and social policy.

American Inequality and the Social Organization of Suffering

Our findings show how respondents' pain narratives reveal similarities, differences, and inequities that organize experiences of pain and suffering.

First, our analysis shows various ways pain affects the lives of respondents. Their accounts reveal how both chronic and acute pain shaped workplace possibilities, interpersonal relationships, and respondents' understanding of their roles and identities. Pain entered discussion as a practical dilemma that often required a response to resume activity patterns, which typically involved medical engagement or other strategies for numbing. In the wake of the opioid crisis, the use of narcotic painkillers was particularly charged, and framed in moral terms. This was part of a broader set of distinctions respondents made between legitimate and illegitimate, honorable, and stigmatized ways of managing pain. Concerns about the implications of being ill, unable to bear pain, using narcotics, or what outward appearance of suffering signified, were described as (or feared for the potential to become) anchoring aspects of social identity.[15] Pain took on a widely acknowledged moral valence.

15. Subjects may hide pain because its underlying condition (such as aging or disease) can be seen as discreditable—speaking negatively to a person's identity (Goffman 1963)—but not immediately visible and "discrediting." Others might see being direct about pain as candid, admirable, or efficacious depending on whom they are in-

Second, our analyses show how aspects of social stratification and inequality in America— including gender and education (which we compare directly) and race and class (which emerge in narratives)— were associated with differences in narratives describing the origin and consequences of pain. Patterns revealed in networks and in-depth narratives reveal how subjective experiences, including complex phenomena like pain, can be objectively distributed in ways that map on to broader circumstances (such as economic precarity or disparate medical treatment) in ways that organize social suffering. AVP narratives highlight unequal challenges, treatment, resources, and beliefs about what it means to be in pain.

Available coping strategies reflected different constraints in life circumstances, but discussions of morality and distinction were seen across groups. Some responses were framed or recognized as admirable (such as working through pain, methodical sobriety), whereas others were framed as a marker of stigma (such as taking narcotic painkillers, letting pain become part of identity). Further, the social position of the person experiencing pain—often related to race, class, gender—was commonly connected in in accounts of whether pain was seen as legitimate by medical providers and others.

AVP pain narratives also offer insights into how inequality affects the origins of pain. Narratives highlighted how the risks of violence, workplace injury, stress, and the intersecting vulnerabilities of illness and material deprivation accumulated in ways that could radically alter life chances. This was most prominent in the narratives of women, especially those from marginalized groups, who described how pain reflects and exacerbates the burden of navigating work, caregiving, and medicine. These accounts referred to disparate medical and nonmedical resources as well as challenges in having concerns about pain taken seriously in medical settings. Perceptions of gendered mistreatment and dismissal were found across education levels.

Our analyses support earlier findings regarding the significance of gendered experiences of pain in several ways, including the challenges women report in establishing credibility in medical settings as well as the convergent challenges of managing pain and care work. When framing pain as distinction, people from varied backgrounds emphasized that persevering through pain and maintaining sobriety is admirable and honorable. However, women's narratives focused on prioritizing others' care over managing own's own pain for the good of families, whereas men's accounts emphasized bearing pain as a form of adversity, a test to be born silently with social stigma and identity at stake.

Table 2 provides a brief summary of some key themes identified in our network and narrative analyses that show broader patterns within and across groups.

These findings support a key assertion of social scientific theories: challenges grounded in the body, including pain, are deeply intertwined with social inequalities. Inequalities shape not just the likelihood of circumstances that cause physical pain but how pain is understood and managed. The strategies that people ultimately deploy to manage pain, whether taking narcotic painkillers or toughing-it-out through suffering, distinguish or stigmatize them in the eyes of other people and societal institutions. However, this challenge is not faced in a level-playing field. Unequal opportunities in work, family, and medical institutions can reinforce racial, socioeconomic, and gender disparities. The narratives of the people interviewed in the AVP often evidenced a recognition of how both the origins of pain and their opportunities for navigating it reflected social inequalities even as these inequalities shaped their responses.

As a whole, these findings suggest that objective inequalities shape experiences of pain,

teracting with. Empirical research demonstrates that both communities and medical contexts shape responses to pain, with the latter historically and contemporarily involved in dismissal or mistreatment of pain among minoritized populations (Biedma-Velazquez et al. 2022; Morales and Yong 2021; Hoffman et al. 2016).

Table 2. Themes Related to Origins and Experiences of Pain

Cross-Group Theme	Localized Theme (Group)
Pain creates everyday problems.	Sources of pain: Work, trauma, complex life trajectories
Pain management reflects morality.	Distinctions: Silent endurance as honorable (male) Putting others first as honorable (female) Pain is a medical problem (higher income/education) Pain is part of life and work (lower income/education)
Pain creates threats: Lifestyle Addiction Relationships	Pain creates threats: Economic threats (esp. lower income/education) Threats to family (female) Identity threat (male) Experiences with medical institutions: Doctors do not believe women (female) Confidence managing doctors (male, higher education)

Source: Authors' tabulation.

while different ways of managing pain can create additional suffering, marginalization, stigma, or distinction (Abramson 2015; Bendelow 1993; Bourdieu 1984, 1999; Shim 2010). Differential vulnerabilities appear to be exacerbated by historical phenomena such as the fallout of the opioid crisis (Smirnova 2023).

Methodological Innovations and Limitations

Our analyses show how combining qualitative analyses with computational mapping of patterns can help reveal connections important to studies like ours, and which might otherwise be missed. A computational ethnography approach enabled us to situate narratives that reveal social mechanisms connecting inequality and pain against the backdrop of broader patterns in the AVP data. The process of doing so may offer insights for future analyses of large qualitative data sets (Abramson et al. 2018; Li and Abramson 2024). The analytical strategy section describes our procedures as well as the set of methodological techniques we used to effectively subset and classify text, combine computational pattern recognition with in-depth reading, and generate network visualizations. The appendix situates this approach along with other research paradigms.[16]

These study has several limitations. First, although the AVP data fit our questions, they were not generated prospectively for our project, which may limit the depth of pain narratives. Direct questions about acute pain, chronic pain, or social suffering will be useful for future work. Second, we used broad categories for our networks to address issues of complexity and data volume. This is because attempts to examine education-by-gender interactions, or map language by racial-ethnic identification, produced sparse corpi of text data. Although we discuss nuances that manifested in our qualitative analyses throughout

16. The combination of semantic networks and qualitative analyses of narratives were complementary for connecting general language patterns across groups (represented as semantic networks) and the narratives shared by our subjects (represented as qualitative narratives). Conceptually, the networks can be thought of as a visual representation of language structures and basic themes (for example, medical engagement), and in-depth narratives show how respondents draw connections (for example, women's pain is ignored by doctors). Our use of interpretive coding (Abramson and Dohan 2015) provides a link between these levels, and is key to triangulating patterns across levels of data.

and note that we do not reduce findings to network categories, increased data will allow more comparisons to be conducted with confidence.[17] Third, it was difficult to assess interviewer effects or site-specific sources of bias at the time of writing. Fourth, the nature of the secure data sandbox and confidentiality limited our ability to generate interactive linked visuals or provide additional depth about respondents, which would be ideal in this genre of work. Nonetheless, we are confident that our findings reveal important aspects of social inequality and health and offer methodological resources for future work.

Policy Implications

Our findings reveal general patterns that show how American pain reflects inequalities. This is an important topic for policy, because it is another point of evidence showing the unequal burden of social suffering borne by vulnerable groups and the implications for health systems (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Farmer 1996). Social scientific examinations such as this article offer an avenue to understand broader patterns and can help identify ways policy might address inequities. For instance, our findings support the argument that policy needs to look at the unequal effects of not just the expansion of opioids (Mullins, Gilligan, and Bhattacharyya 2022) but also how their criminalization and stigmatization disproportionately exacerbate challenges with pain and life chances (Smirnova 2023). Our findings show that validation of pain in medical encounters is important to Americans, and yet people (particularly women) often feel ignored or delegitimized (Toye et. al 2021). Our analyses reveal examples where persistent pain exacerbates social vulnerabilities when unmanaged, but many forms of management are stigmatized and precarious (Anderson, Green, and Payne 2009; Mullins, Yong, and Bhattacharyya 2022; Janevic et al. 2017). Further, our work suggests that narratives remain an important source of data for health policy and that large-scale qualitative studies are valuable in this regard (Dohan et al. 2016). Analyses of what American voices have to say about pain in particular have implications for expanding equitable and just health policy at the level of government, clinics, and workplaces in the United States.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Our approach to analyzing the AVP data is only one possible approach to qualitative and mixed-methods comparison. A key point of value for studies like the AVP is the potential for multiple uses for researchers from varied backgrounds and approaches. Rather than present our work as the only reasonable solution, we have always begun with the observation that qualitative social science has a rich and laudable history of multiple paradigms (Abramson and Gong 2020) and even though a large-scale data source such as the AVP maps on to our arguments for the utility of scaled qualitative studies, such work need not be seen as an a priori replacement to more traditional qualitative inquiry (Abramson and Dohan 2015).

Epistemic Position and Logic

Given perennial debates about the role and utility of qualitative methods, it is important to situate our work to both be reflexive about our use of methods and avoid issues of misspecification. Qualitative approaches have included diverse scientific and humanist traditions in post–World War II social science, sometimes leading to assiduous debates about what makes research qualitative, as well as heated debates about the role of interviews and field research in an era of big data (Small 2021). Our work proceeds in accordance with the broad principles of methodological pluralism, which suggest that multiple modes of inquiry can aid in producing a fuller understanding of the phenomena of sociological and policy importance, even under the umbrella of qualitative methods (Abramson and Gong 2020; Lamont and Swidler 2014).

Our research was conducted in accordance with the principles of contemporary realism, and aims to identify patterns that can be seen by other researchers' qualitative, quantitative,

17. We are also aware of the danger of essentializing racial, gender, and SES cultures, as well as the potential for aggregation errors, which added to our concern about drawing generalizations where the data were sparse.

and mixed-methods projects. A core advantage of qualitative methods in the realist paradigm is the ability to examine phenomena with a level of depth that cannot be captured using other approaches (Sánchez-Jankowski and Abramson 2020). We also recognize that critical, humanist, constructionist, and exploratory approaches are used in qualitative inquiry in fields such as anthropology and sociology, with goals such as critiquing society or generating ideas for survey research, and have made important contributions in this regard (but see also Burawoy 1998; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Collins 2000, 2002). Although these approaches have yielded important insights and correctives, the benchmark we apply to our qualitative works is the ability to reliably capture patterns and processes that are important and might be obscured or hidden using other approaches. This is particularly valuable in examinations linking social inequalities, response strategies, and beliefs, where our goal is to provide scholarly insights that can also inform evidence-based policies.

A core limitation of qualitative inquiry in the conventional scientific tradition has always been related to scale and sampling limitations that impede the ability to generalize in a probabilistic way (Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski 2020; Small 2009). Related issues include the absence of tools to make sense of large volumes of qualitative data without quantitative or computational reductionism (Abramson and Dohan 2015); the difficulty of managing complex human subjects data for open science (Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021; Freese 2007); the unequal resources for conducting qualitative research at scale (Abramson and Dohan 2015; Bernstein and Dohan 2020); the historical paucity of analytical approaches for linking broad patterns and nuanced mechanisms empirically (Abramson and Sánchez-Jankowski 2020; Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021); the lack of clarity about what qualitative researchers of different traditions aim to do in their comparative analysis (Abramson and Gong 2020); and the general contestation and often combativeness of the qualitative field. However, many of us remain drawn to these methods because they reveal important aspects of the world—how people think about, experience, and navigate the contours of American inequality—with a precision and sensitivity to context that has to date not been captured in surveys, analyses of administrative data, historical methods, found data, or experiments. In engaging with these matters, our article also endeavors to show that the methodological challenges are not insurmountable, and qualitative research might pursue multiple modes of response, as part of a productive and respectful dialogue as seen in this double issue.

We have argued that at least some of the technical challenges of "big (qualitative) data" are becoming more manageable in the computational era, given that technology allows both scaled inquiry and possibilities for data processing that go beyond the traditional possibilities of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (for example, Dohan and Sánchez-Jankowski 1998). To this end, in this article we deployed techniques from computational social science while articulating tools that may have utility for others who share analytical aims (but see also Abramson and Dohan 2015; Abramson et al. 2018; Li, Dohan, and Abramson 2021; Li and Abramson 2024). Yet, without thoughtful deployment, technical complexity does not in itself advance social inquiry, and for our part we have tried to explain our decisions and trade-offs throughout this work.

We are grateful that the American Voices Project has provided a generative locale for deploying some of these methods in alignment with the goals of building an open qualitative social science. We hope this initiative will continue to produce not only useful empirical findings but thoughtful methodological dialogue.

Computational Information and Replication

Text preprocessing, word embeddings, and semantic network analysis are implemented in Python 3.9.5 using "gensim==4.2.0", "matplotlib==3.4.2", "networkx==2.5.1", "nltk==3.6.2", "pandas==1.2.5", and "spacy==3.0.6".

The network visualizations were created in R 4.2.3 using "ggplot2 (3.4.0)", "igraph (1.3.5)", "ggraph (2.1.0)", "dplyr (1.1.0)", "RColorBrewer (1.1-3)" packages.

For replication code, please contact the authors directly to facilitate sharing in accordance with American Voice Project protocols.

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Making Sense of Health-Related Labor-Market Exits and Disability: Evidence from the American Voices Project

JAMES HIEBERT, LILLIAN KAHRIS, AND KRISTIN SEEFELDT

Issues around stigma and deservingness may be particularly salient for people who stop working due to health-related reasons. Although historically those experiencing disability have been viewed as "deserving" of assistance, disability has also been stigmatized. Using the American Voices Project data and narrative and discourse analysis methods, we ask how those with a health-related labor-market exit make sense of their exit. We find that respondents use various words to describe themselves with respect to their exit and that they use legitimization strategies when discussing why they do not work.

Keywords: disability, stigma, deservingness, health, work

Work is a central organizing feature of adult life in the United States (Kalleberg 2009) and for many plays a large role in how individuals construct their identities and make meaning of their place in society. Moreover, work is an expected activity of adults; job loss, then, not only may result in lost income, but also could carry stigma and shame (Brand 2015). Issues around stigma and deservingness may be particularly salient for people who stop working due to health-related reasons. On the one hand, many of these individuals may be considered "disabled," and historically people who were disabled were considered deserving of support, particularly public support (Katz 2013). This might result in fewer feelings of shame. Additionally, as former workers, these individuals may be perceived as having contributed to society and, in terms of public benefits, paid into the Social Security system (Beechey 2016). On the other hand, being disabled may carry its own experience of stigmatization, particularly in the context of a nation that values self-sufficiency and individual responsibility (Charmaz 2020).

More recent theoretical work around disability argues that disability is not a matter of individual deviance or inability to function in

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the larger world, including the world of work, but instead the result of social structures that are inflexible and designed to exclude (Grue 2016). This model, the social model of disability, contrasts with the medical model of disability, which, broadly speaking, locates disability within an individual as a pathology or aberration, something to be fixed, treated, or otherwise medically attended to. Although heavily criticized, the medical model informs disability benefits policy; recipients of disability programs are determined eligible based on functional limitations and excused from working instead of being given services to help them work (Smart 2009). From the perspective of stigma, embracing the social model of disability may provide individuals with the language to reject individualized and pathologized notions of disability and focus instead on the barriers placed upon them by the larger society (Shakespeare 2013). The Americans with Disabilities Act tasks employers with providing accommodations for workers who have limitations, demonstrating its rootedness in the social model of disability in that it seeks to remove some of those barriers and allow fuller participation in the labor market.

Disability, therefore, is a status and a term around which there is tension as it relates to stigma and deservingness. How do people who leave the labor market because of their health talk about their identity and their social position (their health, their work, their relationship to the state)? How might these narratives reflect norms and ideas of stigma and deservingness? What do these patterns mean for research and policy? We use interview data from the American Voices Project (AVP) and a narrative analysis approach that draws on a theoretical framework of stigma and deservingness to address these questions, noting relevant limitations in our ability to draw strong conclusions in some cases.

THEORETIC FRAMEWORK

How individuals make sense of their health-related labor-market exit may be shaped by ideas of deservingness, perceptions of stigma, and the ways in which their disability is integrated into their identities. In all these domains, though, there are tensions around how people experience, understand, and talk about their health and their reasons for not working.

The notion of deservingness has shaped public and private views about who is worthy of assistance and dates back many centuries, having been codified within the English Poor Laws that served as the foundation for U.S. social welfare policy (Katz 2013). People with disabilities have long been viewed as a group who are “worthy,” given that their conditions were due to no fault of their own, whereas someone considered able bodied is assumed to be able to function on their own, including being supported via employment. However, as Celeste Watkins-Hayes and Elyse Kolvasky (2016) note, ideas about deservingness intersect with racism and gender stereotypes to complicate the categorization of various groups. For example, White widows with children were viewed as a group worthy of governmental assistance when the Aid to Dependent Children program was enacted in the 1930s. Yet, as the program grew and was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), its recipients increasingly were women of color who had never been married, the view of the program shifted, and policies became more punitive and focused on moving recipients off of the program and into work (Nadasen 2007; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

Government assistance for those with serious health problems also reflects the deservingness framework. For those with work histories in the formal labor market, the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program may be available. Benefits for this program tend to be more generous than those of the public assistance disability program, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), in part because of differences in their funding structure. SSDI benefits are funded via employer and employee payroll tax contributions, whereas SSI is funded out of general government revenue streams with receipt limited to individuals meeting income and related eligibility criteria. Thus recipients may view SSDI payments as “theirs,” given that they have paid into the system before drawing these benefits, and the general public may have a positive view of this group due to their history as workers. SSI, on the other hand, may be viewed as welfare, a form of assistance that in the United States has historically had negative connotations (Gilens 1999). That said, SSI benefits are typically more generous than other forms of cash assistance, in particular the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program that replaced AFDC, reflecting the view that those with disabilities are more deserving of assistance than the so-called able bodied are. However, growth in both the SSDI and SSI rolls has been accompanied by an increase in public discourse about people who are supposedly cheating the system with fraudulent disability claims (Whittle et al. 2017). Are people who receive disability benefits, regardless of program type, still considered deserving?[1]

Research on public perceptions of disability programs and the extent to which recipients perceive stigma from receiving them is fairly limited. Experimental studies have found that how SSDI is perceived is predicated upon whether survey respondents are primed to consider the important social insurance role the program plays or to consider its potential for abuse (Fang and Huber 2020). A smaller study found strong negative perceptions of disability programs, grounded in ideas about recipients committing fraud and a belief that one should work hard instead of receiving handouts (Rabinovich 2020). From the perspective of program beneficiaries, Henry Whittle and his colleagues (2017) argue that the arduous disability application process can doubly stigmatize people; individuals may already be experiencing stigma because of their health conditions, and this negative sense of self may be made worse by a bureaucratic system that assumes applicants are seeking to commit fraud or are shirking responsibility by not working (see also Lopez et al. 2018). Other research has found that Black women perceive that their disability applications will be subject to higher levels of scrutiny, in part because of stigmatizing, racialized perceptions about welfare recipients, including racist tropes about so-called welfare queens who abuse the system (Pryma 2017). Among those experiencing mental health problems, though, receipt of a monthly income through a disability program was a source of status and importance in their community and helped offset the stigma these individuals perceived from having been diagnosed with a mental disorder (Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker 2014).

The broader literature on stigma is relevant to discussing feelings of worthiness related to receipt of government benefits and having a disabling condition. Erving Goffman's (1963, 3) seminal work on the topic posits that stigma arises from having a characteristic that is socially constructed as "deeply discrediting," resulting in a "spoiled identity." Bruce Link and Jo Phelan (2001) theorize that stigma is the result of processes of labeling (such as calling a person "disabled"), separating (distinguishing those with disabilities from the able bodied), stereotyping (believing that SSI recipients are really just lazy), and status loss (being viewed as lower status because of an inability to work). They also note that stigma involves power, in that these processes can only occur to groups with lower levels of power within a particular domain. In the context of benefit receipt, to the extent that programs such as SSDI and SSI may be perceived negatively or as welfare, the stigma associated with the program itself may be transferred onto the beneficiaries.

Having a disability in itself may result in experiences of stigmatization. It may mark difference or even social deviance, although not all types of disability may be stigmatized in the same way, or at all (Grue 2016). The extent to which a disability is concealable, perceived as controllable, or part of a larger collective community may all play a role (Major et al. 2017). For example, some individuals with mental health diagnoses may have no outward appearance of disability, whereas someone who uses a wheelchair is seen as being unable to walk. A person who was injured from a falling object may be viewed more favorably than a person whose accident occurred while they were under the influence of a substance. And those whose disability links them with others in the same group (such as people with limited hearing)

1. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) estimates that one in four Americans have some sort of disability. Yet the proportion of working-age adults who receive some sort of disability is around 4 percent (Social Security Administration 2021).

may be able to deflect stigmatization through advocacy and other efforts.

Many studies on disability make the distinction between congenital versus acquired conditions, including a number of studies on stigma and disability. A review of this work has found mixed results, with some studies finding greater stigmatization for those with congenital disabilities and others that those with acquired disabilities are sometimes blamed for having become disabled (Bogart, Rosa, and Slepian 2019).

Ideas about deservingness and experiences of stigmatization may or may not play a role in how people with health-related work exits talk about this transition. One strategy in which former workers may engage is to draw on some type of disability identity as a way to understand and make meaning of their situation. The term "disability identity" has no one agreed-upon definition in the literature (Forber-Pratt et al. 2017) but may be thought of as orientation toward a disability (Darling 2003), which in turn may be shaped by individual experience and social structures (Adler et al. 2021). This disability identity may be grounded in one of the different models of disability, most notably the medical and social models of disability. The medical model, which has been dominant in much policy formation around disability, locates disability as an impairment that deviates from normal functioning but that can be managed through medical intervention. This process of medicalization may be driven by individuals with a given health status or institutional actors, such as doctors (Conrad 1992). The social model, by contrast, views disability as the interaction between a health condition and the social environment. Access and opportunity, in this model, are not the result of impairment but rather of socially constructed barriers (for an overview, see Colorafi et al. 2021). The social model promotes a positive view of disability and has been used by many in the disability rights movement to push for policy development and change in societal attitudes (Oliver 2013). The medical model, on the other hand, may reinforce stigma if people with a disabling condition believe themselves to be deviant (Grue 2016).

For adults, onset of a disabling condition may require a renegotiation of how they understand themselves, both from the perspective of having an impairment but also placing the individual in a social minority group—people with disabilities (Adler et al. 2021). However, adults may have had other identities on which to draw, including worker, parent, and others, and may not need to develop a disability-rooted identity nor even consider themselves disabled (Heller and van Heuman 2013).

Our review highlights a number of tensions and challenges individuals with health-related work exits may face when trying to explain their reasons for not working and receiving benefits and how the frameworks of stigma and deservingness are reflected in their accounts. In what ways might people's narratives around their health-related work exit reflect notions about deservingness or stigma? How might the ambiguity of deservingness as it relates to disability shape the words and the structuring of the accounts people use to talk about themselves, their identities, and the circumstances under which they left the labor market? These are the questions this study will address.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

To analyze discourse around health-related labor-market exits, we used transcripts from the American Voices Project, as described in the introduction to this issue (Edin et al. 2024). After exploratory research reviewing the transcripts of both workers and nonworkers as they related to the decision to work, we constructed a sample of individuals with health-related labor-market exits, as this emerged as a distinct phenomenon.[2] We first selected all cases in which the primary respondent reported not

2. Our exploratory analysis occurred iteratively throughout the research process. Ultimately, this exploratory analysis included reading and categorizing the transcripts of labor force nonparticipants (*n* = 388), workers over sixty (*n* = 121), all workers who received SSI or SSDI benefits (*n* = 31). We also read a sample of the transcripts where other adult members of the household beyond the primary respondent may have been labor-market nonparticipants (*n* = 149). We initially read the transcripts of workers over sixty-five and nonworkers over sixty,

working in the week before the interview. We excluded cases when the respondent was looking for work or was a full-time student. This left a total of 388 transcripts. We read through these transcripts to determine whether the reason for not working was related to health problems that were not temporary. We eliminated from consideration respondents who reported retiring (not because of their health) or being unemployed but not working for reasons other than their health (such as parental leave, layoff due to COVID-19). We also eliminated cases with such low audio quality that the transcript was too difficult to read and cases with multiple respondents where it was not clear who was speaking. This left us with an analytic sample of 183 cases.

Our next step was to reread these transcripts and code each for discussions about work and health, the transition out of the labor market, and interactions with disability programs. These discussions about health problems, disability, and their link to work arose naturalistically, as an answer to queries about when the person last worked, or in response to one of the protocol questions ("Sometimes, health problems get in the way. They can even affect people's ability to work or care for their children. How about you?").[3] We held at least weekly meetings to discuss initial observations, and from these broad categories we developed codes to categorize the type of language respondents used to characterize themselves with respect to their health and work status, their labor-market transition, and any limitations they faced because of their health. For these codes we examined how respondents told their story about leaving the labor market and how they described themselves and their functional challenges, given that they were no longer working. To further engage in this analysis, we drew from the techniques of narrative analysis as well as critical discourse analysis (Souto-Manning 2014). In narrative analysis, the "analyst is interested in how a speaker . . . assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning . . . interrogat[ing] intention and language" (Riessman 2008, 11). Examining narratives provides a researcher an opportunity to uncover the internal meanings that individuals ascribe to their lives but also the larger world in which they live (Smith and Sparkes 2007). Using critical discourse analysis allowed us to examine how these narrative accounts relate to larger institutional levels, namely notions of stigma and deservingness.[4] We follow the approach of Myriam Winance (2007) and suggest that the choice of words people use are ones that allow them to define the world in which they live and thus are worthy of examination and analysis. Either through analyzing a discrete unit of text or by piecing together several, we were able to examine the language respondents used to talk about work as it related to health and the structure of their story, thereby providing insight into respondents' meaning-making processes (Floersch et al. 2010) around labor-market exits driven by health. We primarily used Microsoft Excel to code and analyze the data, copying relevant units of text into cells, applying codes to those cells, and then

before focusing on the emergent phenomenon of respondents explaining their decision to leave the labor market due to health. We later confirmed the comprehensiveness of our analysis of health-related labor-market exits by reviewing the transcripts of all other labor-force nonparticipants and workers receiving disability benefits.

3. Among the 183 transcripts within the analytic sample, the amount of relevant text to our research questions varied between transcripts. We coded a random selection of sixty-six transcripts from the analytic sample in NVivo, allowing us to calculate the proportion of transcripts we had identified in which respondents talk about health-related labor-market exits. The mean amount of coverage of codes about work transitions, health issues affecting respondents' lives, and social and disability benefits program use within this subsample of transcripts was 7.5 percent (SD = 0.060).

4. Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1986) describe accounts as linguistic devices used "whenever an action is subject to valuative inquiry." Narrators use accounts to "verbally bridge the gap between action, and expectation." We use the term account alongside justifications to describe the presence of such narration within AVP transcripts.

sorting the data to determine the frequency of categories and codes, discussed in the Findings section.

Table 1 summarizes selected demographic and program-use characteristics of our analytic sample (those with health-related exits) relative to those of the whole population and of other people who did not work, were not looking for work, or were full-time students.

Eleven percent of the total respondents are included in our analytic sample of those with health-related labor-market exits. Among those not in the labor force permanently, our analytic sample represents 47 percent of respondents. Those between fifty-five and sixty-four were most likely to have left for health-related reasons. Relative to the entire population, respondents in the analytic sample were more likely to have not completed high school, live in rural areas, be people of color, and receive SSDI or SSI. These patterns are consistent with demographic predictors of people who retire early or involuntarily for health reasons as estimated from conventional surveys (Szinovacz and Davey 2005; Munnell, Hou, and Sanzenbacher 2018).

Table 1. Demographic and Program-Use Characteristics of Sample, by Labor Force Participation

		Not in Labor Force	
Characteristic	In Labor Force *N* = 1,228 (%)	Other Nonparticipants *N* = 2,050 (%)	Health-Related Exits *N* = 183 (%)
Age			
18–24	141 (11)	24 (12)	*
25–34	271 (22)	56 (27)	*
35–44	198 (16)	51 (25)	*
45–54	157 (13)	21 (10)	35 (19)
55–64	165 (13)	27 (13)	79 (43)
65 and older	260 (21)	16 (8)	47 (26)
Gender			
Man	547 (45)	40 (20)	67 (37)
Woman	666 (55)	163 (80)	113 (63)
Race and ethnicity			
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*
Asian alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	46 (4)	*	*
Black or African American alone, not Hispanic or Latino	218 (18)	46 (23)	53 (30)
Hispanic or Latino	240 (20)	63 (31)	29 (16)
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*
Some Other Race alone, not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*
Two or more races, not Hispanic or Latino	44 (4)	*	*
White alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	647 (54)	81 (40)	83 (46)
Education			
Less than high school	99 (8)	37 (18)	45 (25)
High School	262 (22)	63 (32)	58 (32)
Some college	379 (31)	64 (32)	55 (30)
Bachelor's degree or higher	473 (39)	36 (18)	24 (13)

(continued)

Table 1. (*continued*)

		Not in Labor Force	
Characteristic	In Labor Force *N* = 1,228 (%)	Other Nonparticipants *N* = 2,050 (%)	Health-Related Exits *N* = 183 (%)
Marital status			
Cohabitation	117 (10)	29 (14)	*
Divorced	160 (13)	17 (8)	48 (26)
Married	435 (36)	86 (42)	44 (24)
Separated	36 (3)	*	*
Single or never married	388 (32)	55 (27)	46 (25)
Widowed	83 (7)	*	25 (14)
Urbanicity			
Rural	180 (15)	42 (20)	46 (25)
Suburban	524 (43)	87 (42)	67 (37)
Urban	524 (43)	76 (37)	70 (38)
Interview mode			
Face-to-face	556 (45)	94 (46)	89 (49)
Phone	671 (55)	111 (54)	94 (51)
SSI receipt	48 (4)	26 (13)	37 (21)
SSDI receipt	58 (5)	23 (11)	87 (48)
Pension or retirement receipt	189 (16)	14 (7)	26 (15)
Social Security receipt	250 (21)	32 (16)	46 (26)
Medicare receipt	244 (20)	26 (13)	90 (50)
Medicaid receipt	214 (18)	84 (41)	89 (49)

Source: Authors' tabulation.
*number of respondents in a characteristic less than or equal to ten. Within a given group of characteristics (for example, race and ethnicity), if only ten or fewer respondents had only one characteristic, the number of respondents for the second smallest characteristic was also starred. Such starring is used in all tables.

FINDINGS

In this section we present the results of our narrative and critical discourse analysis. Much like other articles in this double issue that use interpretivist qualitative methods (Morales 2024; Casselman-Hontalas, Adams-Santos, and Watkins-Hayes 2024), we developed typologies for the words people used to describe their status relative to their labor-market nonparticipation and the stories they told about why they were not working or were receiving disability benefits. To the extent that having a disability, being out of work, and using government benefits might all contribute to a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963), we identify four ways that participants used to describe themselves with respect to their social position, including how they justify that position. By "justify" we do not wish to imply that this group of respondents should have had to explain to an interviewer why they were not working, or that their reasons should be evaluated for their worth. Instead, we are interested in how respondents talked about not being able to work and what that might mean for the ways in which they understood their labor-market exit, including the cause of the exit.

We highlight the narratives that respondents presented to identify legitimacy in their social position that may be in response to norms of stigma and deservingness that our review of the literature suggests might be present for people who are not working due to health issues and who may be receiving public benefits to replace that income. In doing so, we note that the AVP protocol did not specifically ask respondents how the experience of leaving the labor market due to health affected their sense of self, nor did the protocol ask about potential stigma surrounding their health or benefit receipt. Therefore, our analysis is limited to the narratives, accounts, and justifications that people invoked at multiple points during a single interview. These narratives highlight ways that larger ideas around stigma and deservingness may operate to shape the story they tell an interviewer about their health-related exit from the labor market. The four narrative categories that emerged are mostly, though not entirely, mutually exclusive.[5] Table 2 summarizes selected demographic and program-use characteristics of respondents by their primary narrative typology.[6]

"Disabled"

Of the 183 respondents in our sample, fifty-nine primarily referred to themselves as "disabled," used the word disabled to describe their status, or identified directly with a particular health condition (such as "I'm bipolar"). The manner in which these respondents claimed a disabled identity varied, although several themes emerged. Some, like Lawrence, an older Black man who used a wheelchair after being injured in a vehicle accident when he was a younger adult, repeatedly included the phrase "because I'm disabled" during the interview each time he was describing how his health affected his ability to work, go to school, or receive disability benefits.[7] For example, as Lawrence described his experience of not being able to complete trade school, saying, "I passed [on] that. . . . I needed some help to pick that stuff up, because I'm disabled. I can't pick anything up." Brenda, a White woman, when asked to describe her health immediately said that she was "born disabled" and that she "had been written off by the government so that [she] did not receive health services," unlike others that she perceived as having similar health conditions. For respondents like these, having lived with the condition for most of their life may have given them more time to develop an identity around being disabled (Heller and van Heuman 2013), hence this label resonated with their experience. Describing oneself as disabled may also be a way for these individuals to counter an expectation that they should be working. In this sense, the use of "disabled" may reflect a claim of deservingness. Brenda in particular faced challenges accessing benefits despite believing she had a valid claim to them as someone who was "disabled."

Others used "disabled" to describe a transition that had occurred, usually from worker to someone no longer in the labor market. This type of justification or account was often used to explain behavior subject to valuative inquiry, such as an "early" labor-market exit (Damaske 2013). Lanette, a Black woman in her sixties,

5. All respondents were assigned a primary narrative category for the purposes of providing quantitative counts.

6. Quantitative analysis did not confirm relationships between respondent use of these narrative typologies and gender, race and ethnicity, education, and geographic distribution (nor do they rule such relationships out, particularly given the relatively small sample size of each typology when divided by group). Within the analytic sample, we compared the relationship between prevalence of our narrative typologies and gender (X^2 [6, N = 183] = 10.51, $p > .05$), combined race and ethnicity (X^2 [12, N = 183] = 9.55, $p > .05$), education (X^2 [12, N = 183] = 12.71, $p > .05$), and urbanicity (X^2 [6, N = 183] = 4.18, $p > .05$). None of these tests allow us to reject the hypothesis that there is no systematic variation between groups. Respondents who use retired were statistically significantly more likely to be older than sixty-five than other respondents in the analytic sample, X^2 (6, N = 183) = 25.42, $p < .001$. Further, at the time of writing, the AVP dataset does not provide enough information (for example, strata across the two rounds of sampling) to conduct these statistical tests while incorporating the complex sampling design. We therefore hesitate to make strong claims about prevalence of narrative typologies by groups at the population level.

7. Respondents are identified by a pseudonym. We changed minor details in descriptions of respondents and removed certain demographic identifiers to protect respondent confidentiality and ensure at least 10,000 people in the U.S. have the same combination of descriptors.

Table 2. Demographic and Program-Use Characteristics of Sample by Narrative Typology

Characteristic	Disabled *N* = 59 (%)	Got Hurt *N* = 37 (%)	Bad Health *N* = 68 (%)	Retired *N* = 19 (%)
Age				
18–24	*	*	*	*
25–34	*	*	*	*
35–44	*	*	*	*
45–54	13 (22)	*	18 (26)	*
55–64	28 (47)	17 (46)	28 (41)	*
65 and older	*	12 (32)	13 (19)	13 (68)
Gender				
Man	16 (27)	14 (39)	25 (38)	*
Woman	43 (73)	22 (61)	41 (62)	*
Race and ethnicity				
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*	*
Asian alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*	*
Black or African American alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	15 (26)	13 (35)	19 (28)	*
Hispanic or Latino	*	*	13 (19)	*
Some Other Race alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*	*
Two or more races, Not Hispanic or Latino	*	*	*	*
White alone, Not Hispanic or Latino	26 (46)	15 (41)	32 (48)	*
Marital status				
Cohabitation	*	*	*	*
Divorced	22 (38)	*	13 (19)	*
Married	12 (21)	*	16 (24)	*
Separated	*	*	*	*
Single or never married	14 (24)	*	23 (34)	*
Widowed	*	*	*	*
Education				*
Less than high school	15 (26)	12 (32)	16 (24)	*
High school	12 (21)	14 (38)	24 (35)	*
Some college	22 (38)	*	21 (31)	*
Bachelor's degree or higher	*	*	*	*
				*
Urbanicity				
Rural	16 (27)	*	19 (28)	*
Suburban	24 (41)	14 (38)	22 (32)	*
Urban	19 (32)	14 (38)	27 (40)	*
Interview mode				
In-person	20 (34)	21 (57)	36 (53)	*
Remote	39 (66)	16 (43)	32 (47)	*
SSI receipt	17 (30)	*	11 (16)	*
SSDI receipt	31 (53)	21 (58)	29 (43)	*

Table 2. (*continued*)

Characteristic	Disabled *N* = 59 (%)	Got Hurt *N* = 37 (%)	Bad Health *N* = 68 (%)	Retired *N* = 19 (%)
Pension or retirement receipt	14 (25)	*	*	*
Social Security receipt	13 (23)	11 (31)	13 (19)	*
Medicare receipt	31 (54)	18 (50)	30 (44)	*
Medicaid receipt	29 (50)	23 (64)	33 (49)	*

Source: Authors' tabulation.
*number of respondents in a characteristic less than or equal to ten. Within a given group of characteristics (for example, race and ethnicity), if only ten or fewer respondents had only one characteristic, the number of respondents for the second smallest characteristic was also starred. Such starring is used in all tables.

described her health history before turning to the event that made her "disabled" and which she pointed to as the reason she stopped working. Lanette recounted that she was nearing the end of recovery from a knee replacement when she suffered a fall, breaking one of her hips. When describing the surgery and extended recovery that followed, she noted that "when I broke my hip, that made me disabled." Similarly, Lashay, a Black woman in her fifties, initiated the topic of disability when asked about her recent work history. She claimed the identity of being disabled and used it to support the reason why she did not work. Lashay revealed the specific injury after first saying, "And I can't do too much work because I'm disabled." Later in the interview, though, she called herself "healthy" even while acknowledging that she had "messed her back up." Here, being "disabled" is something that happened to the individual, a condition that is used to mark an event, including the end of being a worker. Also implied in these statements is that being disabled is the opposite of being a worker—when one is disabled, one cannot work. This binary representation of disability is difficult to analyze in terms of what it may say about stigma. It may reinforce the notion that being disabled is deviation from one of the norms of adult life (Titchkosky 2020)—working—and thus stigmatized, or, alternatively, that disability is an acceptable reason not to work, implying that people who are disabled are deserving of the expectation not to work.

Respondents who used language about being "disabled" also distinctly described their health with specific medical terms and linked that to their receipt of disability benefits and exit from the labor market. For Laurel, a White woman in her sixities, pain was medicalized—a syndrome—which justified not working. Asked to provide the "story of her life," Laurel concluded her brief self-reflection by saying, "I have chronic pain syndrome, chronic pain condition that has been disabling so I get Social Security Disability." Laurel's identification of a pain as a "syndrome" that disables is in contrast with other respondents who described pain generally as part of their "bad health" and may reflect an account to legitimize her health experience, deservingness of benefits, and social position. This subsample's use of medicalized language around disability, health, and work is consistent with the analysis by Corey Abramson and his colleagues (2024, this issue) of how respondents use medicalized language around pain to establish credibility with health-care providers, similarly using "legitimate" terms to manage and minimize stigma.

Finally, a few respondents put distance between themselves and the word "disabled," indicating that the label had been assigned to them by others. Toni, a respondent of two or more races in her fifties who was dealing with severe mental health problems, said she could access mental health care because "the judge disabled me [based on] my childhood," referring to the psychological impacts of childhood abuse. Later in the interview, Toni described family members who "were disabled" as a result of physical health conditions, and she distanced herself from them by invoking the assigned label. When recounting her family members' multiple diagnoses, such as diabetes, breast cancer, and arthritis, she remarked, "I'm not particularly diagnosed with anything." For Toni, disability was a status assigned to her through interacting with the legal system, not something brought on by physical health, as was true for members of her family. Jesse, a woman in her fifties, talked about how she experienced muscle pain and injury that doctors were unable to diagnose or effectively treat. Jesse said that even though doctors could not give her an "official diagnosis," she took comfort in the fact that she was "actually considered disabled now" once the doctors indicated that she was eligible to receive disability benefits. For these respondents, the use of the word "disability" implied a status given to them that could, if needed, provide them with language to validate their claim to the status and thus manage some of the stigma associated with "disability." Their conditions were serious enough that a bureaucracy and medical professionals said they were unable to work and thus may reflect a way to claim deservingness.

In none of these instances, though, did respondents use any language that might indicate that they held a "positive disability identity." Some, like Lawrence, discussed being disabled in negative terms, noting the difficulty of being incarcerated while mobility impaired and a sense that he was a target in the neighborhood for robbery because of limited mobility. For others, disability was a word to mark a transition or a label placed on oneself by a bureaucratic agency or medical provider. Many of these respondents had worked for many years, had children and sometimes grandchildren, and had other identities which may have been more important. Or, by using disability to describe an event, including a bureaucratic one, respondents may have been negotiating stigma and deservingness by attributing their status to the decisions of others rather than an identity that they actively sought.

"I Got Hurt"

Other respondents (*n* = 37) reported that they had left the workforce because of an injury, accident, or another discrete health event, but they also never used the word "disabled" in relation to themselves. They were also more likely to explain the nuance of the injury, illness, or diagnosis, rather than using broad language such as "disability" (or "bad health"). Typically, these accounts were given in response to an inquiry about work or when they last were employed. Sam, a woman of two or more races in her fifties, described when asked about her work history how she injured her head after falling in the restaurant where she worked. She repeatedly used the phrase "got hurt" as she demarcated her time not working from her time working; for example, when later describing her financial position, she said, "I get by. If I never got hurt, I'd be living on Easy Street. I'd be making more; I'd be working overtime." Sam did not use the word "disabled" or describe her health condition in depth, but instead returned to the logic of "getting hurt" to structure her health narrative. Workplace injuries were not uncommon in this group, with numerous stories of accidents involving heavy equipment, injured backs from repeated lifting, and slip and fall accidents that damaged bodies. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), between 2.6 and 2.8 million workplace accidents occurred each year from 2017 through 2021, and many of these injuries will result in eventual receipt of Social Security Disability Insurance benefits (O'Leary et al. 2012). That an injury is narrated as the direct result of harm experienced at work may help individuals legitimate their claims about being deserving of help, in that the job, and not the individual, was responsible for their condition.

Other respondents who were injured in settings other than work also used the language and logic of "getting hurt" to structure their narration about stopping working. Beth, a White woman in her fifties, slipped outside and broke her wrist. Uninsured at the time, she reported that the break was bad enough to require surgery, but that she could not afford it. So the bones did not heal as they should have and her hand did not function properly. Beth indicated she no longer could work in food service, saying, "I can't physically do it anymore because of the restaurant pots and stuff, they're so heavy, I can't physically do it with this hand. You know, I can't work the can opener, you know, we're talking industrial everything. I can't do it anymore." Beth, along with other respondents, was able to clearly relay exactly how their injury or other health condition was directly related to not being able to do their job, deploying logic to bolster their claim (for example, my job requires that I use a can opener; my hand isn't functional; therefore I cannot do my job). Analyzing these statements through the lens of stigma and deservingness, this type of logic provides Beth with a legitimacy of her status as someone out of the labor force—an injury simply rendered the job impossible to do.

"My Health Is Bad"

Other respondents ($n = 68$) did not call themselves "disabled" and did not identify specific accidents when they "got hurt," but did refer to their "bad health" as the reason they were no longer working. Claudia, a White woman in her sixties, had worked a variety of jobs, some involving lifting and other manual labor, starting when she was sixteen years old. After she recounted her work history, Claudia noted that "just, my body just got wore out and started deteriorating" as she described why she stopped working. Similarly, Diana, a Black woman in her mid-seventies, said that "my health got bad. I was having problems with my knees and ankles," when she was asked about when she stopped working. She did not refer to herself as disabled (though she did mention that she received disability benefits) or speak in depth about her health beyond what she called these "problems." Like respondents who "got hurt," these respondents described "bad health" as an inevitable or natural explanation for why they were not working.

Some respondents who used vague language around "bad health" may have done so to explicitly avoid discussions of health that would cause others to negatively judge them . Anita, a Hispanic woman in her forties who experienced whole body pain that grew more severe after a car accident, used vague language throughout the interview to describe her health. She later described trying to avoid talking about her pain to her own family: "They would look at me and they'd say, 'nothing is wrong with you, you're okay, you can work.' I'm like, I may look okay from the outside, but inside of me I'm just, you know, my bones hurt, my body hurts. . . . My daughter was like, 'what's going on now, you know, it's always something.' And that's why I don't want to burden nobody or tell anyone, like, I'm hurting."

Here, Anita's vagueness as the interviewer questioned her may be rooted in the stigmatizing actions of her family and the recognition that others may not believe in the severity of her pain.

Other respondents did not always provide clues about their health or the root of any stigma they were seeking to avoid. For example, Stanley, a White man in his sixties, described receiving disability benefits but never identified the condition or circumstances that led to his labor-market exit and subsequent benefit receipt. When repeatedly asked for clarification by the interviewer for details of the damage to what he referred to as his "nerves," he responded, "It just came on. One time, I don't know what happened. . . . I got a bad back." These respondents may have been trying to minimize stigma and talk of status loss, while in other cases, they might have been answering in good faith but having difficulty narrating details of their health or health-related labor-market exit.

"I'm Retired"

A smaller number of respondents ($n = 19$) used the language of retirement to describe their current situation with respect to employment, even if they received a disability benefit or described having experienced a major health event prior to stopping work. Patrice, a Black woman in her sixties, concluded the description of her work history by noting that "I worked for [my previous employer as a customer service representative] until I retired. I had to retire." Patrice repeatedly described this transition of "having to retire" when describing when she stopped working. She indicated that she had to retire because of a heart condition, and she started collecting disability benefits after stopping working. Echoing the distinction drawn by respondents who narrated "disability" as separate from their labor-market exit, Rumalda, a woman in her seventies, discussed an accident at the hospital kitchen where she worked that led to her labor-market exit, as well as a number of surgeries she had to correct health problems. Still, she primarily identified as retired. She described her job responsibilities and how that led to her "retirement": "I worked for twenty years. . . . They were very heavy pots! . . . you have to sweep the floor and mop, lift heavy things. I developed a few hernias. I have two in my spine. Yes. I have this ear—they took this ear out and put in an eardrum. One hernia, two hernias. My gallbladder. My womb, intestines, and bladder. Yes. I'm starting to walk. Not too long ago I did my knees. . . . I quit working because I had an accident and fractured two disks."

Like many of the respondents in the "bad health" group, Rumalda also listed out numerous health problems, some of which she likely developed after she stopped working. She also invoked language around being hurt ("I had an accident"). Yet Rumalda described the exit itself as being "retired." At more than seventy years old and being out of the labor force for twenty years, "retired" could also be the word for Rumalda that, from a life course standpoint, made the most sense as an identity and reflected her current position. Overall, respondents who called themselves retired tended to be older than fifty, so retired would be an identity more readily available than it would be to someone who was thirty-five years old.

From a standpoint of stigma management and asserting deservingness, being retired is associated with having put in years in the labor market and paying one's dues as a worker. People can retire precisely because they have worked. Older adults have also historically fallen into the category of "the deserving" (Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2016), and retirement typically occurs in the early to mid-sixties (Center for Retirement Research 2017). Claiming an identity of being retired could allow individuals to be viewed as deserving, both because of age and because of the status of having been a worker.

Strategic Application of Narratives

Across the analytic sample, respondents invoked different words or phrases or drew on different rationales to describe their status of being out of the workforce. Although most were receiving disability benefits, only a portion described themselves as disabled. Even when the word was used, respondents deployed it differently based on the context of different, potentially stigmatized settings, some as an identity, others to describe the point that marked the end of their time in the labor force, and others noting it as a label applied to them.

This strategic application of narratives within an interview is exemplified by Devonte, a Black man in his twenties who was stabbed. Devonte mentioned his health for the first time in the interview when describing his daily routine. He initially emphasized the stabbing's effect to introduce why his daily routine did not involve working, despite his young age. He then continued his narrative by using language about "getting hurt": "Right now, I'm trying to take care of some things with social services. Because [I'm] working on getting my disability. I had some [physical] issues. . . . I got stabbed." At the close of the interview, when asked to share what he most wanted changed in society, Devonte explicitly invoked his "disabled" identity as a way to indicate that he truly deserved benefits, unlike others in his community he seemed to deem unworthy: "Man, where my check at? That's what I be wanting to know. Where my check? (Interviewer: Yeah? Disability?) Disability, yeah. Mainly, that's it. Just trying to get my disability because they keep denying it so I might have to get a lawyer. And I'm *really* disabled. I'm not really able to work, but some Black people here get checks. I don't get a check."

Devonte's case also exemplifies how when providing justifications for not working that reflect narratives of who is deserving, respondents invoked other systems of stereotyping and group separation, including racialized perceptions of deservingness.

Some respondents invoked shifting identities as they described navigating the disability benefit application system. The judgment of a bureaucracy provided respondents both benefits in the form of financial assistance and legitimacy to not be in the labor market. Martin, a man in his forties, described being trapped between "getting hurt" and being "disabled." After an initial injury, Martin's back deteriorated, causing increasing pain. A series of treatments were unsuccessful, and he asked a doctor for a medical exemption from work, yet the Social Security Administration declared him able bodied: "I told [the doctor] that" 'You already know you had burned the nerves and I still have pain in my back."' So that's when the doctors classified me as disabled, and they told me that I can't go to work. So, that's how we've been trying to fight the state and trying to fight the class, am I a disabled worker now? I don't want to go to work no more but they still say I'm able to go to work."

Martin's responses show how the shifting judgments of bureaucracy affected both the availability of benefits and the language and identities employed by respondents.

In light of data limitations, we cannot always make direct links between respondents' narratives and an experience of stigma or a claim of deservingness, as is the case with Martin. Yet, that some people described in great detail how an injury or health problem interfered with their ability to work suggests some internalization of the idea that nonworkers need a justifiable reason for being in that category. Further, opting to use the term "retired," a status in the United States that is widely considered to be earned, rather than "disabled" may suggest a need to reframe a health-driven labor-market exit.

Finally, the narratives a respondent invoked were affected by the mode and context of the interview. The AVP shifted from face-to-face to phone interviewing after the COVID-19 pandemic began and found significant differences in the language respondents used to describe their health-related labor-market exits. Face-to-face respondents were more likely to indicate they were retired rather than opposed to disabled, whereas phone respondents were more likely to say disabled than retired. Respondents who used the word "retired" may have been more likely to answer an in-person interview request (a coverage effect) because they had fewer constraints on their time. Respondents who used the word "disabled" may have felt less stigma conducting their interview over the phone than in a face-to-face setting (a social desirability effect)—further indicating the role of these terms as a way to manage deservingness.[8]

DISCUSSION

Our study finds that people who leave the labor market for health reasons use several discursive and narrative techniques to describe their exits, and many of the ways that they tell their stories could imply a need to manage a stigmatized identity and provide a deserving rationale for not working. The tensions illustrated in respondents' discourse demonstrates a need to rethink the status of "disabled," at least as it relates to benefit receipt and absence from the labor market. Although some respondents presented their health condition as a legitimate reason for not working, only 32 percent of this sample reported that they were "disabled," indicating that this term is not embraced by many who, for the most part, meet the Social Security Administration's definition of being disabled. Some had other identities on which to draw (including being retired), whereas others referred to their general health or injury. We suggest that the importance of work in the United States has rendered even labor market exits on the basis of a health problem as an event that carries stigma and for which individuals believe they must make claims of deservingness. This runs counter to much of the literature that categorizes beneficiaries with a disability as automatically deserving that help. Many of the people in that status, though, may have internalized a shift in the popular discourse about disability and disability benefits, one that casts suspicion on a previously deserv-

8. Even though COVID-19 is associated with increased likelihood for disability, such differences are unlikely to be driven by the health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic itself (Deitz 2022). No respondent in the sample discussed COVID-related health effects as the reason they had exited the labor market. Further, no difference between the proportions of the whole AVP sample who reported having a health-related labor market exit before and after the onset of the pandemic was statistically significant: X^2 (2, N = 1616) = 0.82, p > .05. However, differences in the proportions within the analytic sample who used disability and retirement language before and after the pandemic were significant: X^2 (3, N = 183) = 8.21, p = .041.

ing group of people as possible shirkers who are not pulling their weight.

Additionally, although other studies have found that many of those who are disabled reject the term (Bogart et al. 2017), our study demonstrates the ways that people use these narratives to make sense of their situation, with some finding other ways to define themselves in ways that gives them claims to being deserving of not working. Moreover, we are able to do this with a nationally representative sample of people with a variety of health conditions, not analyzing the experiences of people with a particular type of disability.

Our finding that some respondents adopt the term "retired" to describe their health-related labor-market exit also shows the persistence of the perceived stability and status of "lock step" or "traditional" retirement. Research on retirement and meaning-making (Kojola and Moen 2016) has sought to understand the meaning of retirement given macro-level changes in institutional support available for nonworkers (such as the decline of defined benefit retirement plans) and demographic transitions (such as populations living and working longer) that make "traditional retirement" less prevalent. Our study, however, indicates that adults who experienced health-related labor-market exits, who themselves were less likely to have access to pension or retirement savings and instead receive SSDI or SSI, use this language to narrate their experiences.

The legitimization discourses in which people engaged to explain why they were not working centered on invoking experts and using logic. In particular, respondents who logically spelled out why they could not work drew on the required job tasks that their condition no longer allowed them to perform. These techniques gave respondents the opportunity to justify their absence from the labor market in a way that portrayed them as a group who were reasonably not working (as opposed to shirking) and thus deserving of their status.

The emergent narratives among people who left the labor market for health reasons have implications for future research, including in survey and qualitative research, the design and outreach of social services, and for public policy. Before discussing those, we note that our study is not without limitations, which we highlight here.

First, we are unable to make strong claims about whether respondents' narratives were shaped by actual experiences of stigma from other people and subsequent needs to assert deservingness. The design of the AVP provided breadth of topic areas over depth or thickness of qualitative data and provided no opportunity for secondary analysts to ask probing questions (just as the original data collection guide did not allow for much probing) or conduct follow-up interviews. For example, although we observed that some respondents brought up racialized stereotypes when drawing distinctions between themselves and those who they perceived as undeserving, we had no opportunity to systematically ask all respondents about this subject in follow-up questions during the interview. Thus we do not confirm or refute whether respondents' racial identity affects their use of narrative schemes. Similarly, the length and richness of respondents' discussion of their health and work meant that not every respondent provided information that constituted a narrative in its idealized form. Future qualitative research on respondent's narratives about their health and work should address the roots of these accounts (and in this way, the AVP can serve as a public resource to establish new areas of research). In addition, future interpretive qualitative research that uses the AVP corpus should note this inherent variation among the focus of respondents' interviews.

Second, our study is limited by the AVP's sampling frame and design, which selected respondents who lived independently and served as the "household head."[9] The narrative findings presented here may not generalize to the population of people who live in group quarters

9. We reviewed a sample of the 149 transcripts of respondents who themselves were not in the analytic sample but who had other household members who were labor market non-participants. We decided that the primary respondent in these cases did not consistently provide enough content about the experiences of these other household members to allow for narrative analysis.

(such as group homes or assisted-living facilities) or who are being supported by another member of their household.

Finally, we note our positionality during the secondary analysis of interview content as researchers who do not identify as having a disability. Our identities too may both shape how we interpreted our findings as well as what we overlooked.

Our findings can inform future qualitative work on people who leave the labor market for health reasons. By analyzing a nationally representative sample of the population and then selecting respondents who shared health-related labor-market exits, we find that respondents share no one set of language and may not consider themselves disabled even if they are receiving benefits from a disability program. Future research with people with disabilities can provide important depth of qualitative detail, but recruitment of those participants should consider that some people with lived experience of disability will not identify as disabled. Similarly, future qualitative research on retirement and meaning-making should seek to include respondents who might otherwise be excluded from sample selection because they experience a health-related labor-market exit. Finally, future studies might consider whether individuals' perceptions of stigma and deservingness change over time, are more prevalent across different subpopulations, adapt to different conditions (such as economic downturns, major policy shifts), or are sensitive to the type of survey or interview mode.

We recommend attention be given to the role stigma plays in health narration and service delivery. Policymakers and practitioners alike should be aware that not all individuals will be quick to identify as "disabled" or outline the specific ways in which injury impacts occupational functioning. Moreover, despite the history of disability as being perceived as a deserving category in the United States, the narratives of those with health-related labor-market exits indicated that this status is fraught. We find that respondents take efforts to prevent stigma and present a deserving story in narrating their health-related labor-market exit. The process of applying and being approved for disability benefits can be arduous and for some, take years (Dorfman 2017), also reflecting a level of mistrust of those seeking to claim the benefit. Perhaps it is time to recognize that deviations from a presumed norm of "worker" are inherently imbued with stigma, unless larger cultural shifts occur.

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V

Omnibus Analyses

Multiple Meritocracies: A Text-Based Analysis of Personal Narratives Revealing Distinct Frames of Success

MICHAEL SAUDER, YONGREN SHI, AND FREDA LYNN

What concepts do people use to construct narratives about how to get ahead in contemporary society? To what extent do these narratives reflect distinctive constellations of beliefs? What are these constellations and is their usage contingent on social position? With these questions in mind, we used the qualitative data associated with the American Voices Project to systematically explore and map constellations of beliefs. Adopting a natural language analysis, we identify linguistic patterns that signal the relative importance of different get-ahead outlooks as cultural frames. These outlooks include not only traditional meritocratic factors, but also a range of nonmeritocratic influences, including nonrational factors such as luck and religion. Our analysis identifies three distinctive versions of meritocracy—frustrated, complex, and detached—in how people describe their life trajectories. Our findings suggest that the idea of meritocracy hides meaningful variations and nuances in the ways people construct visions of what meritocracy means and how it is constituted.

Keywords: meritocracy, getting ahead narratives, luck, k-means clustering, word counts, dictionary method

Belief in meritocracy, analysts of U.S. society generally agree, "anchors the self-image of the age" (Markovits 2019, ix). In a broad sense, people usually conceive of meritocracy in terms of the idea that hard work supplemented by skill or talent will lead to desired rewards. More formally, it can be defined as a "social system in which advancement in society is based on an individual's capabilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth, or social backgrounds" (Kim and Choi 2017, 12; see also Castilla and Benard 2010; Reynolds and Xian 2014). Most understandings of meritocracy—both lay and academic—center on hard work (Reynolds and Xian 2014) and emphasize equality of opportunity.

With its emphasis on structural advantages and constraints, a hallmark of sociological

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work on inequality and stratification is the demystification—either implicitly or explicitly—of strong versions of meritocratic ideology. In recent years, growth in inequality and the politics of resentment have spurred on popular critiques of the dominance of meritocratic beliefs as well. Daniel Markovits (2019), for example, characterizes an unreflective commitment to meritocracy as a false idol and a trap, one that—according to the book's subtitle—"feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite." Similarly, in *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel (2020, 25) warns of the moral deficiencies of the current meritocratic system: "Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, and that those on bottom deserve theirs, too."

These critiques of meritocracy are well founded, but they also tend to use the term meritocracy uncritically—sometimes asserting its dominance as an obvious truth, sometimes using beliefs in particular factors (such as hard work or education) as proxies for belief in meritocracy as a system, and nearly always discussing meritocracy as if its meaning is consistent or monolithic across members of society. In this article, we aim to look more closely at how people express their beliefs about meritocracy and how one gets ahead in modern society. Specifically, we explore whether the general idea of meritocracy hides important differences in how people construct different forms of meritocratic belief systems: Does meritocracy mean different things to different people? How are beliefs related to meritocracy expressed in practice? Are there identifiable patterns to these nuanced versions of meritocracy?

Addressing these questions can contribute to our current understanding of inequality by exploring how people in the United States invoke beliefs about meritocracy to make sense of what has happened in their lives—the good, the bad, and everything in between. Rather than analyze what individuals have to say about meritocracy directly (such as "To what extent do you believe in the importance of hard work for getting ahead"), we pay close attention to how they invoke or do not invoke meritocratic ideology when narrating life events.

This approach adds nuance to discussions about meritocracy and sheds new light on perceptions about paths to getting ahead in the United States. Given the presumed dominance of meritocracy, for instance, it is useful to investigate whether there are meritocratic true believers—that is, whether adherence to a pure"or literal form of meritocracy (focusing exclusively on individual effort and skill) is a widely held perspective. Of even greater value, however, is to identify the nuanced ways in which people conceptualize meritocracy, to unpack the varieties and roles of nonmeritocratic factors people use to construct distinctive narratives both about how people get ahead and about their life trajectories.

Identifying these distinctive constructions encourages a broader consideration of the nature and influence of these nonmeritocratic factors. Previous studies of meritocracy that have considered nonmeritocratic factors focus almost exclusively on social structure, highlighting the distinction between the individual factors that are central to meritocracy, such as hard work and talent, and the structural factors that also contribute to who gets ahead, such as family wealth, race, gender, or inherited social capital (see Kim and Choi 2017; Castilla and Benard 2010). Although this comparison between the individual and structural is instructive, as well as not surprising, given sociology's focus on structural variables, it also omits other factors that people commonly link to getting ahead and being successful. Specifically, people often attribute success to nonrational factors such as religious intervention or luck—factors that have been understudied in relation to meritocratic beliefs and their influence on people's ideas about getting ahead (Sauder 2020). If we are trying to better understand the perceptions of the factors that lead to success or failure, it is important to investigate how these factors combine, compete, and interact with meritocratic ideology.

The inclusion of these nonrational factors in a consideration of meritocratic beliefs encourages us to move away from common binaries (structure versus individual achievement, merit factors versus nonmerit factors) to a broader model that focuses instead on how types of explanatory factors are combined (or not) to weave together personal narratives about life chances and trajectories. Expanding the menu of perceived influences on getting ahead provokes new sets of questions about how people understand social mobility in the United States, such as the following:

> How much weight do people give to factors outside of one's control as opposed to factors within one's control in their ideas about who gets ahead and why?
>
> Does the perceived balance between in control and out of control factors vary by social position or social characteristics?
>
> Among different types of out of control factors, how do people allocate influence differently?
>
> Are variations patterned in how people attribute influence to structural versus nonrational factors?

More generally, are there constellations of beliefs about getting ahead that can be identified by a more nuanced study of these various meritocratic and nonmeritocratic factors? Are there distinctive and consistent combinations of meritocratic and nonmeritocratic commitments that can be identified across different social groups?

Exploring these questions contributes to existing scholarship on meritocracy by providing a more detailed understanding of the variety of logics that underpin individual perceptions of inequality and social mobility. In addition, this focus on underlying beliefs and logics has practical implications for debates about how to address contemporary inequality since these individual perceptions play a key role in determining both support for existing redistributive policies and the viability of future policy alternatives.

Constellations of Beliefs About Getting Ahead

With these questions in mind, we use the qualitative data associated with the American Voices Project (AVP) to systematically explore and map constellations of beliefs. The AVP, with its extensive open-ended interviews, provides a rare opportunity to examine how people invoke values related to success as they reflect on various aspects of their life histories and current situations. Adopting a natural language analysis, we attempt to identify linguistic patterns that signal the relative importance of different get-ahead outlooks as cultural frames among the interviewees. Specifically, we explore the invocation of six get-ahead outlooks. These include traditional meritocratic factors such as hard work and education but also nonmeritocratic influences such as social structure, religion, and luck. This approach not only allows us to gain insight into how people talk about specific concepts (for example, luck versus religion), but also provides a window into the types of ideas they consciously or nonconsciously draw on to describe the events and trajectories of their lives. We operate under the assumption that if an interviewee has been primarily exposed to a certain kind of meritocratic ideology—such as the idea that hard work is the only avenue to achieve success—they will be more likely to use words and phrases related to hard work or effort in conversations that center around the topic of life history. To clarify, our approach does not imply cause-and-effect connections between meritocratic factors and life outcomes. By assessing how individuals invoke various aspects of meritocracy in their personal narratives, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how they assign importance to meritocratic beliefs in practice. We believe that structural factors play a crucial role in shaping the life opportunities available to these individuals. However, mapping out people's perspectives through their narratives enables research to distinguish between these structural factors, which are largely removed from daily experiences, and the beliefs that individuals actually perceive and act on in their daily lives.

Ultimately, we hope to use this approach to explore the presence of latent classes of people who share similar cognitive frames for getting ahead. Such classes represent patterns in how these values are combined to form distinctive outlooks about social mobility in the United States. Our first goal is to identify the types of getting-ahead narratives in use today. We consider these cognitive recipes that people implicitly or explicitly carry with them to explain and understand their own trajectories and that of others.[1] Which ingredients (that is, values or attributes) or combinations of ingredients make recipes distinct? Second, do these recipes map onto identifiable groups of people?

This approach allows us to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of nonrational factors more generally. It is conceivable, for instance, that many people see nonrational factors as playing an important role in achievement, but that people attribute these influences to different sources: two people see unaccountable forces at play in their life trajectories, but one sees it as a lucky break, while another associates it with God's intervention. What can we learn about perceptions of meritocracy by studying the relationship between different types of nonrational factors? For example, are there groups of people more likely to use luck-related terms relative to an average interviewee? If so, are those who invoke luck less likely to use religious terms than their respective baselines? Underlying these questions is the idea that perceptions about religion and luck may serve the same function as each other for different sets of respondents. Alternatively, interviewees who are more likely to invoke luck or religion might do so in consistent combinations with other sets of beliefs to construct distinctive outlooks about meritocracy and how people get ahead.

Our second objective is to explore the extent to which an interviewee's outlook on getting ahead is contingent on their social positioning. That is, to what extent can demographic characteristics be used to predict the constellation of explanatory factors someone is likely to invoke in explaining their life trajectory? Put differently, to what extent do belief patterns reflect a homogenous group of subscribers?

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The first step in our approach to the AVP data was to construct dictionaries (or lexicons) of words for each concept of interest that could then be used to identify the frequency with which values or attributes were invoked. Implicit in this approach is the premise that the use of outlook-related vocabularies can be used to infer the cultural disposition of a group of individuals, a practical understanding of the social world which is acquired through repeated social interactions and exposure to social contexts (Bourdieu 1984). By counting the terms associated with one kind of get-ahead outlook, we can estimate the relative importance of the outlook in the conversations regarding the life histories and day-to-day experiences in which respondents engaged in the interviews.

To achieve this end, we constructed six dictionaries to assess the degree to which interviews align with particular get-ahead outlooks. Dictionary method is a commonly used approach in text analysis (see, for example, Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Monroe, Colaresi, and Quinn 2017). A dictionary is a list of keywords and their synonyms that conveys the meanings of a specific category or theoretical construct. Three categories are considered: meritocratic traits (education, work), nonrational influences (luck, religion), and social structures (structure 1—ascribed characteristics; structure 2—state, government and politics). It is to our knowledge the first attempt to measure get-ahead outlooks in interviews. We built our own versions of four of the dictionaries (luck, education, structure 1, and structure 2) and adopted two off-the-shelf dictionaries (work, religion) from the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) dictionaries (Pennebaker et al. 2015). In the following, we explain the methodology useds to construct the dictionaries.

The availability of large quantity of textual data—such as interviews, social media posts, or books—has brought a renewed attention to the problem of measurement. Otis Dudley Duncan described the measurement process in social science as "assigning values to express the degree of a quality that an object has"

1. These recipes might be simple such as straightforward meritocratic recipe: hard work + talent + nothing else = success. Or they may be less intuitive hard work + ascribed characteristics + religious intervention + luck = success.

(Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022, 173n1; Duncan 1984). A dictionary is just such an instrument, one that enables the evaluation of how much of a specific quality (such as a get-ahead construct) is present within a particular object (such as an interview). Two indicators of quality are of central importance to the construction of a dictionary: coverage and internal validity (Nicolas, Bai, and Fiske 2021, 2022). On the one hand, measures based on text are different from those based on survey because the responses representing a theoretical construct (such as luck) cannot be easily summarized as numeric values on a Likert scale by respondents. Instead, they are pervasive and diffuse in texts. A comprehensive dictionary should have a high level of coverage of possible responses (words, phrases, sentences) that the author (interviewee in this study) uses nonconsciously to convey the meaning of the construct. In other words, an effective dictionary needs to optimize the likelihood that correct terms are encompassed in the boundary of the construct (that is, maximize the likelihood of true positives).

On the other hand, a dictionary should maintain a high degree of interval validity. This is predicated on the terms included in the dictionary bearing a high level of semantic similarity compared to those excluded from the dictionary. A set of highly similar terms in a dictionary would minimize the chance that incorrect terms are classified as dictionary terms (false positives). Internal validity and coverage are polar qualities of a dictionary. Achieving a high degree of coverage may undermine the semantic coherence of the dictionary's terms, as many less typical terms of the theoretical construct may be included (for example, is a tomato a fruit?). To the contrary, maintaining a dictionary with a high degree of coherence (that is, one including a minimum set of the terms most representative of a theoretical construct) may affect the efficiency of the dictionary in measuring the underlying construct (for example, considering only apples and oranges as examples of fruit).

Our iterative procedure of creating get-ahead dictionaries is composed of three steps (Nicolas, Bai, and Fiske 2021). In the first step, a list of key words was nominated as seed terms. The seed terms refer to specific words that are essential to each of the constructs. We excluded any terms from the dictionary if they have many word senses with only one implying the meaning of the construct. For example, the term workshop is often used in contexts other than formal meetings, so we did not include it in the list of seed terms for education. Thus, the set of seed terms satisfy the condition of strong semantic coherence.

In the second step, we expanded the lists of seed terms with their synonyms. Two sources of word synonyms were used. The first source is WordNet, a widely used lexical database of semantic relations between words (Miller 1995). We first manually annotated each term in the seed list with one or more word senses that are compiled in WordNet. For example, the word *luck* has three word senses listed in WordNet.[2] Word sense 1 refers to "your overall circumstances or condition in life (including everything that happens to you)". Word sense 2 is "an unknown and unpredictable phenomenon that causes an event to result one way rather than another" and word sense 3 is "an unknown and unpredictable phenomenon that leads to a favorable outcome." By manual inspection, we determined that all three word senses are appropriate for the luck dictionary. We then used these three word senses to identify all their synonyms in the next iteration. The second source of synonyms is derived from word similarity scores acquired through a word embedding technique (Mikolov et al. 2013). Word embedding is a language model that learns vector representations of words by analyzing the contexts in which they appear, so that words with inherently similar meanings but infrequent coappearance in the same sentences (for example, mayor and head) can have similar representations because they have common contextual words. We used a semi-automated method developed by Gandalf Nicolas, Xuechunzi Bai, and Susan Fiske (2021), which uses WordNet and word embeddings to expand the lists of term.

In the third step, we each independently

2. See WordNet Search at Princeton University (http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn).

evaluated the validity of each term in the expanded list, that is, whether the terms in the expanded lists are representative terms of the corresponding theoretical constructs.[3] Terms were kept in the dictionaries only if we reached a consensus. Table 1 summarizes dictionary keywords and the intercoder agreements. Of all four dictionaries, Fleiss' kappa, a variant of Cohen's kappa for more than two coders, ranges from 0.20 (structure 2) to 0.68 (luck). Kappa can be interpreted as expressing the extent to which the observed amount of agreement among coders exceeds what would be expected if all coders made their ratings completely randomly.[4] Despite the lack of a consensus on the acceptable value of kappa, three out of four dictionaries fall in the range of moderate to substantial agreement (0.41–0.80). Only one, structure 2, shows a level of disagreement among three coders, though they are in the range of slight to fair agreement. We adopted a cautious approach by retaining only those terms deemed relevant to the theoretical constructs by all three coders. See tables A.1 and A.2 for the full list of terms in each of our constructed dictionaries.

In addition, we used off-the-shelf dictionaries from the pre-validated LIWC dictionary (Pennebaker et al. 2015) to measure religion and work because they are readily available and have been validated on different textual sources.

Table 1 shows the get-ahead dictionaries, their meanings, sample keywords, and intercoder reliability. Complete lists of dictionary terms can be found in the appendix.

Measuring Construct Prevalence in Interviews

We make the standard assumption that the greater the number of dictionary terms present in an interview, the higher the likelihood of the construct of interest appearing. Because our measures of dictionary prevalence in interviews will be used to identify clustering of people in relation to their get-ahead outlooks, we have made additional adjustments to the measuring procedure.

We first counted the number of terms present in a text that correspond to a dictionary. In order to extract and retain only the responses of the interviewees, we performed a special text cleaning procedure to clean the data. The resulting raw count was then normalized by the total number of the words articulated by the interviewee. In addition to the step of normalization, we conducted two further steps to convert the data to a form amenable to the clustering analysis. First, because of the highly skewed distributions of term frequencies—with most of the interviews containing a limited number of related terms, others comprising a substantial number—we applied a logarithmic transformation to each of the get-ahead construct variables.[5]

Next, we standardized the measurements by converting the data distributions of different dictionaries onto a comparatively similar scale. This is an important step given that humans have different tendencies of invoking words from different concepts. For instance, language pertaining to education and religion is more commonly used in everyday conversations than language relating to talent or luck. If dictionaries are measured based on their absolute rates in texts, a clustering algorithm, which will be used to group interview documents, may produce biased results by weighing too heavily the signals from variations in documents that arise from popular constructs, like religion and work, while discounting signals from less pop-

3. The usual procedure of expanding a dictionary is through a process that iteratively includes frequently co-occurring terms with the dictionary terms in texts, followed by a manual evaluation of the validity of the terms; the procedure repeats until no new terms can be added. This is a very costly process as it requires extensive qualitative reading and evaluation by human coders. We adopted our current procedures, which include only three human coders making one round of validity assessments, due to time constraints. Moving forward, we plan to implement more rounds of human coding.

4. Wikipedia, "Fleiss' kappa," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleiss%27_kappa#Interpretation (last modified January 25, 2024).

5. One tactic we use to make sure all the zero counts are not tossed away in the log-transformation is to add one to all the dictionary counts of all the interviews, then apply the normalization and log-transformation.

Table 1. Get-Ahead Dictionaries, Sample Keywords and Intercoder Reliability

Category	Meaning	Sample Keywords	Dictionary Origin	#Words	Kappa
Luck	a consequential chance event that is outside the control of social actors	(un)luck, (un)fortunate, random, accident, fluke, destiny	Constructed by the authors	34	0.68
Religion	the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods (Oxford Languages and Google)	afterlife, god, angel, heaven, hell, divine, sacred, pray, holy, blessing, Islam, doom	LIWC	175	NA
Education	the action or process of educating or of being educated (Merriam-Webster)	tuition, college, universities, graduate, school, educate, GPA, booksmart	Constructed by the authors	138	0.55
Work	to perform work or fulfill duties regularly for wages or salary (Merriam-Webster)	boss, duty, hard work, hiring, layoff, manage, negotiation, organization, portfolio, project, resource, salary	LIWC	444	NA
Structure 1 (ascription)	ascribed characteristics of individuals related to race, gender and class	gender, racism, stratum, social class, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, poverty, poorness, impoverishment	Constructed by the authors	52	0.42
Structure 2 (state)	government and politics	politics, government, authority, regime, Washington, bureaucracy, bureaucratic, govern, legislate, congress, democrat, republic, welfare, senator	Constructed by the authors	64	0.20

Source: Authors' tabulation.

ular, yet equally important constructs, like luck. It is the relativity in usage of one concept that matters for us in differentiating cultural dispositions among individuals. The second source of bias arises from the way that different dictionaries are constructed. Some constructs, like religion, are well defined with an agreed-upon set of terms describing them, but others are less well defined. Constructs with well-defined linguistic boundaries are likely to have greater coverage—that is, more terms—than those that lack clear definitions, which creates differences in dictionary prevalence in measurement. In summary, we measure the prevalence of a theoretical construct in an interview by first counting the frequency of terms present in the interview, then normalizing the data by dividing the document size, and after that, log-transforming the data to adjust for the skewedness of term distributions, and finally, by standardizing the data with the z-score standardization.

Clustering of Interviewees

Our objective is to classify the interviewees into *k* distinct clusters, where interviewees with similar get-ahead linguistic patterns are assigned to the same categories and those with dissimilar linguistic patterns are assigned to different categories. To achieve this objective, we used the widely used *k*-means clustering algorithm to detect the presence of meaningful clusters in the data (Lloyd 1982). The *k*-means clustering algorithm is an iterative process. It first randomly picks *k* centroids (here, interviews) to eventually find clusters in a six-dimensional space in which each dimension represents a dictionary. An interview is assigned to a particular cluster if its Euclidean distance is closer to that cluster's centroid than any other centroid. The algorithm then finds the best set of *k* centroids by assigning data points to clusters based on the current centroids, and choosing centroids based on the current assignment of data points to clusters. The *k*-means is an unsupervised learning method, and the only prior information that needs to be provided by the researcher is the number of clusters into which the data are to be partitioned.

THE AMERICAN VOICE PROJECT

The American Voices Project (Edin et al. 2024, this issue) is a comprehensive qualitative study using in-person and remote interviews, featuring representative samples across the United States. This project uses a diverse methodological approach, encompassing qualitative, survey, administrative, and experimental methods, to investigate key aspects of American life, including family dynamics, community engagement, health, economic well-being, and the impact of recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. AVP, underpinned by a national sample drawn from hundreds of communities, adapts to evolving circumstances, incorporating timely inquiries on subjects such as health, racial disparities, employment, education, and social safety nets.

The project uses a three-stage cluster sampling method to provide a comprehensive view of American communities (American Voices Project 2021). It begins with the selection of census tracts through stratified sampling, followed by sampling single block groups within those tracts. These selections are made in proportion to the poverty population, aligning with AVP's focus on understanding the experiences of the low-income population. In the third stage, the sampling strategy oversamples individuals from the lower half of the income distribution, based on modeled income estimates. AVP includes 192 randomly selected census block groups and thirteen Native Nation tribal areas, with interview plans affected by the pandemic, allowing for a diverse exploration of American life. The final sample consists of 1,613 respondents. A description of the distribution of demographic characteristics can be found in table 2.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the prevalence of six dictionaries in the interviews we analyzed.[6] Table 3 shows considerable variations in the average number of terms interviewees uttered in each of the dictionaries. Terms from the structure 1 dictionaries were used relatively sparsely (M = 2.89 words). Conversely, interviewees were much more likely to invoke words that are from the dictionaries of work (M = 569.6), education (M = 47.6), and religion (M =31.1).

As discussed in the methods section, variations in prevalence can be attributed to two mechanisms. First, these variations could reflect differences in the overall centrality of specific frames in American culture. Table 3 implies that the interviewees, on average, tend to place greater emphasis on work and education than on luck in their accounts of life histories and day-to-day experiences. This is consistent with findings in survey-based analysis. The second source of variation is related to the quality of dictionaries. The two dictionaries that produced high rates of words in interviews are work and religion, and they are off-the-shelf dictionaries from LIWC. These dictionaries comprise significantly more terms (444 and 175,

6. After the data cleaning and process, we omitted the interviews with very short length, that is, fewer than five thousand characters (not words) in length. This step removed four interviews; we used the remaining 1,569.

Table 2. Distribution of Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	653	40.5
Female or nonbinary	943	58.5
Race-ethnicity		
Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Island	59	3.7
Black or African American	317	19.7
Hispanic or Latino	332	20.6
Two or more races	63	3.9
White	808	50.1
Age		
18–24	167	10.4
25–34	335	20.8
35–44	258	16.0
45–54	213	13.2
55–64	269	16.7
65+	322	20.0
Education		
Eighth grade	21	1.3
Associate's degree	127	7.9
Bachelor's degree	301	18.7
High school	312	19.3
Less than eighth grade	33	2.0
Master's degree	167	10.4
PhD or professional degree	64	4.0
Some college, no degree	370	22.9
Some high school	127	7.9
Yearly Earnings		
<=$12,000	626	38.8
$12,001–$24,000	141	8.7
$24,001–$36,000	151	9.4
$36,001–$48,000	104	6.4
$48,001–$72,000	161	10.0
$72,001–$120,000	146	9.1
>$120,000	117	7.3
Party identity		
Democrat	624	38.7
Independent or no preference	707	43.8
Republican	230	14.3

Source: Authors' tabulation.

respectively) than the dictionaries constructed by us. The development of the LIWC dictionaries also has undergone multiple revisions over several years, with the term list being expanded considerably and validated across multiple language sources. The methodology of LIWC dictionaries is detailed in its development manual (Pennebaker et al. 2015).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Dictionary Raw Prevalence

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Size
Structure 1 (ascription)	2.89	3.62	0	36	1,569
Luck	4.75	5.43	0	68	1,569
Structure 2 (state)	14.23	11.47	0	95	1,569
Religion	31.06	28.96	0	289	1,569
Education	47.59	36.13	0	323	1,569
Work	569.55	230.04	43	2,141	1,569

Source: Authors' tabulation.

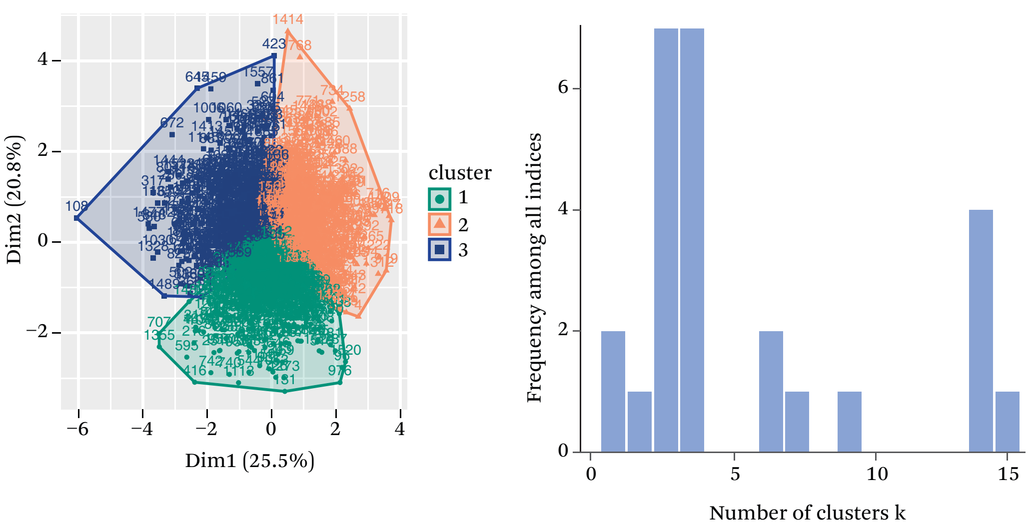
Our intention, however, is not to engage in direct comparison of the prevalence of get-ahead outlooks because doing so involves comparing dictionaries developed by multiple teams using different methods. Instead, we aim to evaluate the relative importance of a particular construct among interviewees and avoid comparing baselines across constructs. For example, who is more likely to use luck-related terms relative to an average interviewee? Are those who invoked luck the same people who avoided religious terms relative to their respective baselines?

K-MEANS CLUSTERING AND LATENT CLASSES

The raw counts from dictionaries were transformed into standardized scores using the procedure described in the methods section, and these scores were then used in *k*-means clustering. Figure 1 displays the distributions of all the interviewees (points) in a two-dimensional space, with the dimensions having no inherent meaning, but the distances between points implying the overall difference in the six get-ahead outlooks. To determine the optimal number of latent classes, we applied thirty clustering indices assembled by Malika Charrad and colleagues (2014), and $k = 3$ is determined as the optimal number by the majority of these indices (as shown in figure 1, that number was seven for these data). The NbClust package in the R programming environment was employed to perform this analysis.

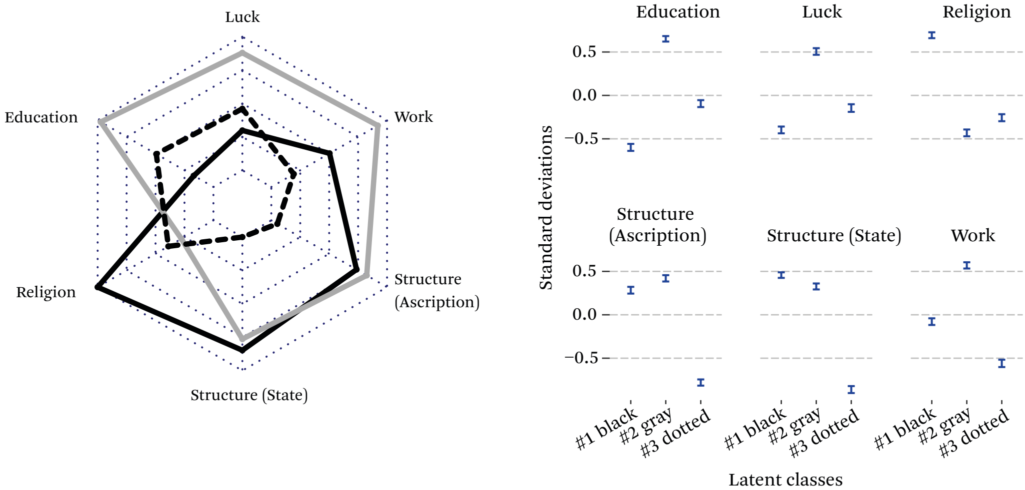
How did interviewees in three latent classes use different get-ahead languages? We gener-

Figure 1. *K*-means Clustering



Source: Authors' tabulation.

Figure 2. Radar Chart of the Relative Importance of Get-ahead Attributes by Latent Class



Source: Authors' tabulation.
Note: Class #1: black line; Class #2: gray line; Class #3: dotted line

ated a radar chart (figure 2) with six axes representing six dictionaries and positions of dots on the axes indicating the relative positions of the latent classes. The panel on the right shows the same information but with error bars for level by dictionary and latent class, where level refers to standard deviations above or below average usage. The outgoing-vertical axes in the radar chart indicate the averaged numbers of standard deviations away from the construct-specific means. For example, the usage of luck-related terms in class #2 was found to be 0.5 standard deviations above the population mean, whereas class #1 and class #3 exhibited 0.4 and 0.2 standard deviations below the population mean.

The radar chart provides clear indications of distinct patterns in the latent classes. The latent class #1 shows, on average, high levels of religion and both structure variables (ascription, and state and politics), demonstrating comparatively lower or intermediate levels on the other three constructs. To the contrary, latent class #2 exhibits high levels of prevalence on every construct but religion. These two latent classes form the two poles in the relative distributions of get-ahead outlooks on the radar chart. Class #3, however, shows relatively low levels of usage of terms from all six dictionaries, suggesting that interviewees in this class are least engaged with the get-ahead concepts that are regarded as important by sociologists. The three latent classes have comparable numbers of individuals, with 526, 554, and 489, respectively.

Demographic Differences of Latent Classes

What is the demographic breakdown of these three latent classes, and to what extent can we predict an individual's demographic background based on the get-ahead outlook they adopt? To address these two questions, we extracted thirteen categories of demographic information collected in AVP and compared their distribution across our three latent classes.

The scales for the demographic attributes in figure 3 are standardized in z-score. Age, income, and education have emerged as important predictors of interviewees' get-ahead outlooks. The interviewees belonging to the latent class 1 (emphasizing religion and structural factors) tend to be comparatively older and have lower levels of income and education than their counterparts in the other two groups. In contrast, the interviewees in latent class 2 (which discusses everything but religion) tend to be younger and have the highest scores on both income and education. Relative to the other classes, the latent class #3 (which is low on every dimension) has intermediate scores on income and education, but these interviewees are also the youngest across the groups.

In addition, other demographic factors are also aligned with membership in the latent classes of get-ahead outlooks. For example, individuals in latent class #1 show a greater propensity to be male, live in rural areas, and not have young children at home, whereas those in class #3 are more likely to be female, live in urban areas, and have young children. Consistent with the associational patterns of income, people in latent class #1 are more likely to be enrolled in welfare programs (Social Security Income and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), but less likely to have worked in the past. People in class #2, to the contrary, are far more likely to be employed and currently not enrolled in any welfare programs. Political identity is also strongly associated with membership in get-ahead latent classes, with those in latent class #1 strongly identifying with the Republican Party, those in latent class #2 strongly identifying with the Democratic Party, and those in latent class #3 showing no political identification.

These findings next lead us to ask whether there is a way to compare the relative strength of demographic sorting by latent class? We use the index of dissimilarity (White 1986) to measure the evenness of distribution of demographic subgroups across latent classes. The index, originally used for measuring racial segregation in geographic areas, is composed of a sum of unevenness across latent classes, indexed by *i*. In the formula, and represent the sizes of demographic subgroups (for example, individuals with and without college degrees) in latent class *i*, whereas *A* and *B* denote the sizes of the same demographic subgroups in the entire population. The index ranges from 0 (indicating a completely random mixing of demographic subgroups and latent classes) to 1 (indicating a full segregation of demographic subgroups by latent class).

$$D = \frac{1}{2}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\left|\frac{a_i}{A} - \frac{b_i}{B}\right|$$

To facilitate the analysis, we dichotomized all the demographic variables. For continuous variables such as age, income, and hours worked, the median value was used as the cutoff point. For variables with multiple categories such as education, race, and place of residence, one of the categories was selected as the baseline (college, White, and rural, respectively). We also removed the moderate category in party identity and dichotomized it as Republican and Democrat. Furthermore, we removed the nonbinary category in gender and dichotomized gender as male and female.

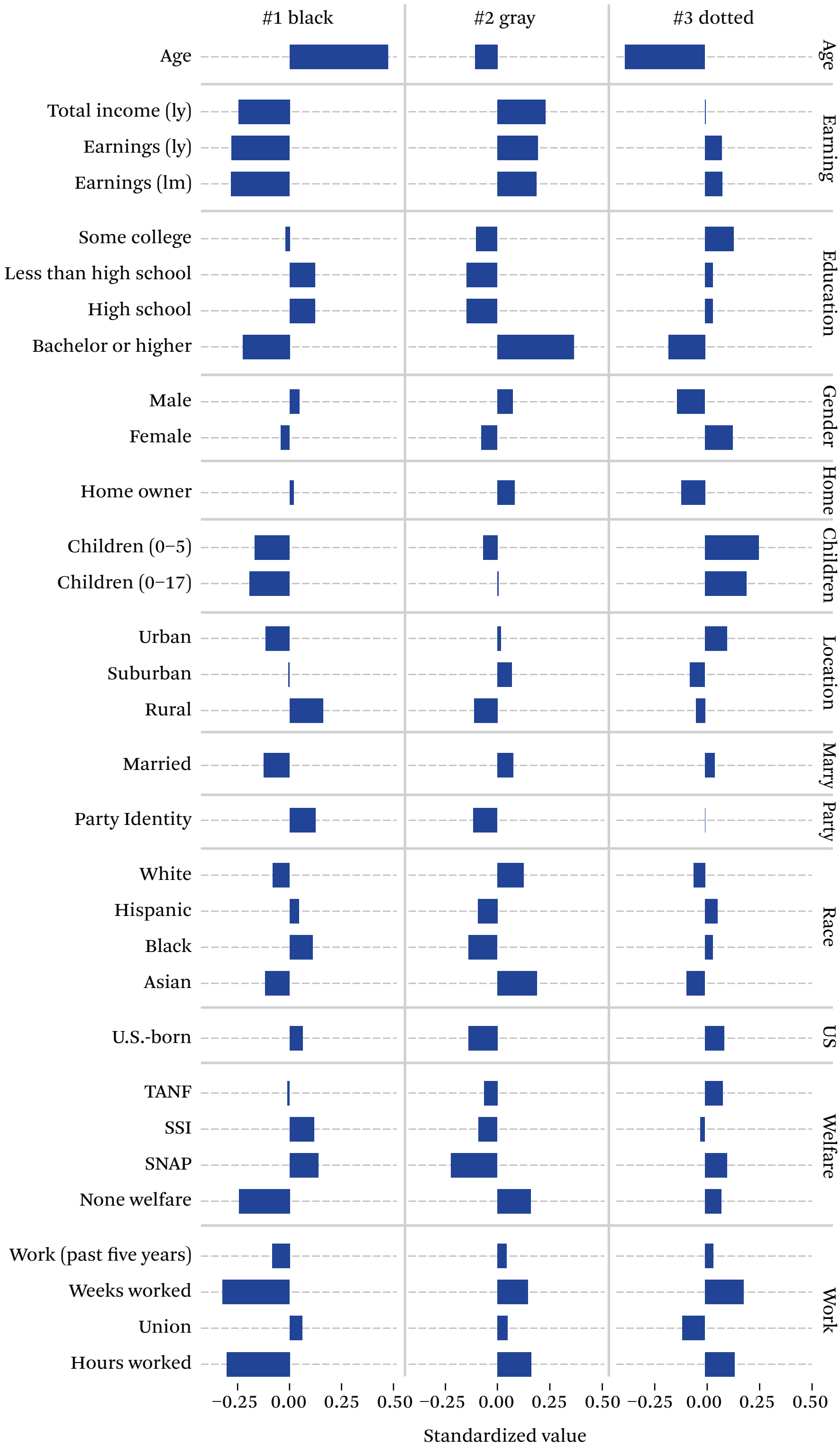
Figure 4 shows a sorted list of indices that align with the visual patterns depicted in figure 3. The results reveal that latent classes of get-ahead outlooks are divided along demographic variables such as age, education, race, and income. As Douglas Massey, Jonathan Rothwell, and Thurston Domina (2009) note, the value of the index represents the percentage of individuals in one group who must move to the other group in order to achieve random mixing. Figure 4 shows considerable levels of segregation of demographic groups by latent classes. For example, the index of dissimilarity for age is 0.27, indicating that approximately 27 percent of individuals in one age group need to move to other latent classes to reach random mixing. The 95 percent confidence interval is calculated based on percentiles of the bootstrap distribution.

QUALITATIVE EXPRESSIONS OF LATENT CLASSES

Our analysis identifies three distinct outlooks related to ideas about getting ahead. Having identified these classes and explored some of their key demographic differences, we next turn to the qualitative data to illustrate how some of the key aspects of these latent patterns were expressed as respondents discussed life events and perspectives.[7] For each cluster,

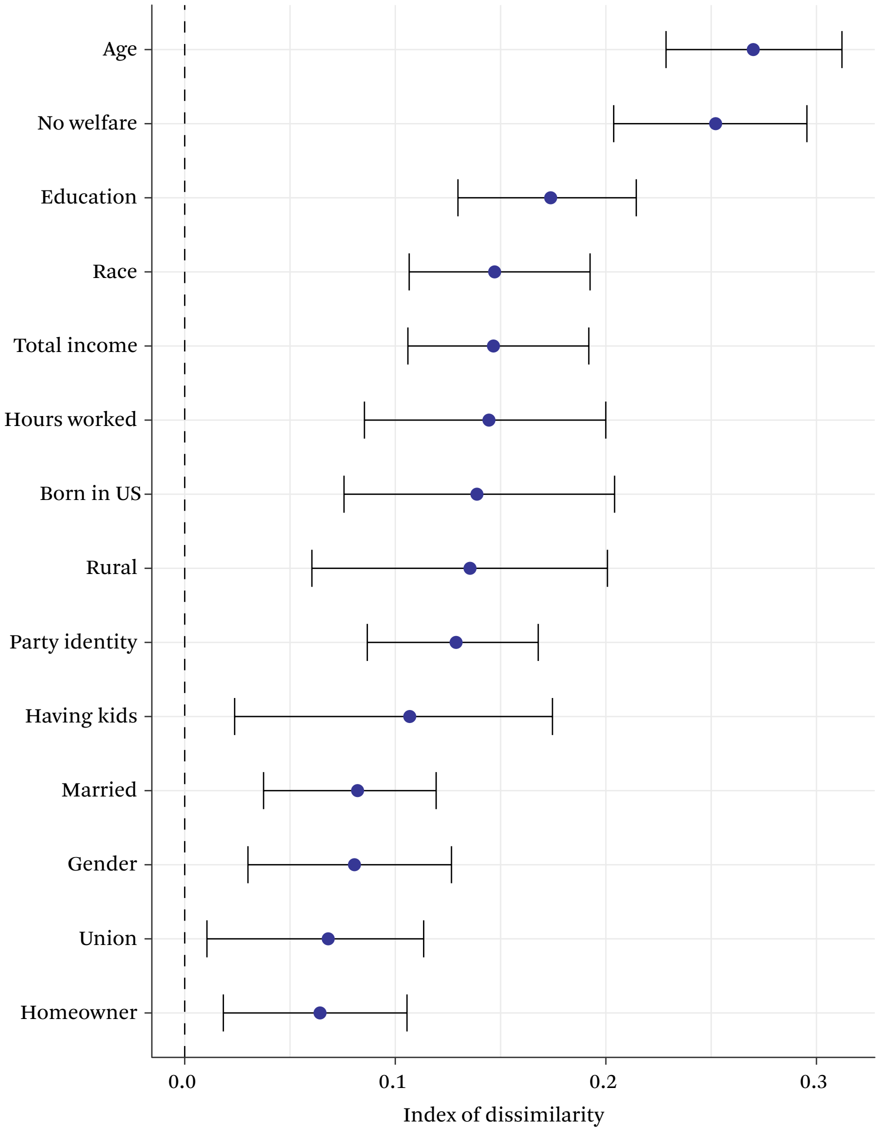
7. Given the number of attributes included in our analysis (see figure 3), our qualitative illustrations can only highlight selected slices of the dynamics we see in the latent class analysis. Our examples aim to give a sense of how the most pronounced attributional tendencies are tied together by respondents in their narratives. Because these illustrations can only provide curated snapshots of the relationships among attributes, we offer them

Figure 3. Demographic Attributes by Latent Class



Source: Authors' tabulation.

Figure 4. Demographics Ordered by the Index of Dissimilarity (95 percent confidence interval)



Source: Authors' tabulation.

we sampled the top ten interviews located nearest the center of each cluster plus a random sample of ten others from each cluster. From these selected transcripts, we qualitatively examined the ways in which they engaged (or did not engage) getting-ahead language in their life narratives. To clarify, the following quotes are not from interviewees who typify each cluster in terms of their demographic profile; instead, they are taken from interviewees whose word choice (content and frequency) rendered them central to a cluster. This use of the qualitative data allows us to add substantive meaning to the word count approach taken in our large-scale text analysis. This process also allows us to identify three

as a demonstration of the potential for marrying a latent class approach with qualitative analysis and a basis for future research.

strains or variants of cultural beliefs relating to getting ahead, which we label, respectively, frustrated meritocracy, complex meritocracy, and detached meritocracy. We now turn to each of these in more detail.

Frustrated Meritocracy

We use the phrase frustrated meritocracy to describe the set of beliefs held by class #1 in our analysis. This class, as shown, is characterized by strong beliefs in religion, ascriptive structure, and state structure, and medium-strong beliefs in work. The group also tends to be older, poorer, less educated, more rural, and more likely to be Republican.

The interviews of people from this group shed light on one core dynamic that underlies this meritocratic type: the belief that there is a right way to get ahead in the United States—a way tied to finding a good job, working hard, and often abiding by religious principles—but that there are structural obstructions that hinder people's ability to effectively use this pathway to success. The main culprits to the meritocratic system working correctly are related to structure: bad policies, government intervention, or identity politics (although the obstacles identified vary across respondents). This disconnect between the right path and people's access to this path results in expressions of annoyance, frustration, and blame.

These patterns are apparent, for example, in excerpts from an older White woman in this category who had raised her children as a single mother:

> It's horrible to know that you're born and bred in this country, you're an abiding citizen, and you can't buy a quality home. . . . When I got divorced, I wanted to work. I went and they said, "You make $12 too much," when I went to the Eastern Credit Union. I wanted to work full time. So, these things aggravated me when I've seen people from other countries came in or I'd see someone walk out with five kids and drive off in a Cadillac and I've got two babies and a toddler walking by—my choice. It's everybody's life, but I just didn't understand the system back then. . . . Right now, I'm making $42,000. I have no debt; I don't have loans.

These statements capture several key aspects of frustrated meritocracy. There is the reference to the way things should be for those "born and bred in this country" and an acknowledgment that they had the desire to pursue to this path ("I wanted to work"). And, importantly, there is also the recognition of the constraints from outside that got in the way of the respondent's efforts to achieve a level of success using this path ("they said," "didn't understand the system," the comparison with "people from other countries"). In adjacent discussions within this interview, this respondent also expresses the religious sentiments that are a key component of this group, citing the importance of a higher power and divinity up above in relation to their life trajectory.

A second respondent in the frustrated meritocracy category provides a different flavor of this worldview as he explains his life events and perspective. This interviewee was a retired, conservative White man who served in Vietnam. He tells his life story in a very linear way—"[I] went to grade school, went to junior high, went to high school. After high school, [I] joined the military, finished my military career, came home, got an associate's degree, got married, had two children, worked for a large company for over twenty years, retired, and then went back to work for them for another fifteen years, retired again, and now living with my wife and trying to enjoy retirement"—that reads much like a textbook example of the meritocratic ideal: education, hard work, and the step-by-step achievement of financial stability. However, even this ideal example of the American Dream is encroached upon by concerns about the influence of how structural forces—especially identity politics and social programs—are subverting the traditional meritocratic path. In the middle of a long explanation of his views of the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, he touches on many of these issues:

> I heard a thing on the news today where they said some store in New York got robbed. And robbing this story, people confronted them and the people that were robbing it said they were part of Black Lives Matter, they also got their phones out and said stopping us is discrimination. And I just said to myself "is this

> where we've come?" . . . I don't know. I don't understand it. In God's eyes, we're all equal. I don't even think God sees color. So, I don't understand it. I think the whole idea of reparation and these other things, especially from the Democrat party . . . I don't understand it. To me, we have Black neighbors, they're good people. We're friends. I don't understand it. . . . So I just, you know, at our age, you just want to get along. But I'm not going to open up my door and give you everything I've got now just because [you] think I'm racist. That's not going to work.

There is a palpable sense of unease throughout this portion of the interview about the state of the world in the present and a feeling that the path that worked well for the respondent is now under threat. This unease, unlike the man's description of his life story, is not linear. It is a mixture of concern about "where we've come," religious principles, the Democratic Party, and the redistribution of resources based on skin color rather than meritocratic principles. The traditional formula for success—hard work plus faith—is disrupted by larger, and largely negative, structural forces.

We see very similar combination of themes in this interview with a White woman in her forties from the East Coast:

> I don't necessarily agree with everything the Republicans stand for, but I agree more with them than I do with the other guys. I'm not a bleeding heart. I feel like if you have two legs and two arms and you are mentally capable of having a job, you should have one. I've seen a lot of people, especially in my profession that pull in a Cadillac Escalade with their nails and hair done and cry poverty in the same voice. . . . So, for me, I feel, again, if you can collect food stamps and if you can collect this and you can collect that, I think that you should be drug tested. . . . And, I feel like a lot of people take advantage of our system.[8]

At another point in the interview she expresses concern about the safety of her neighborhood: "they're pushing people closer and closer and closer to here." Note in particular the use of the anonymous (and never subsequently defined) "they" here. Later, she advocates for more support for working families, but she connects this argument with immigrants and immigration policy rather than other possible political or structural factors.[9]

These respondents highlight a very particular (White, working-class) dynamic that exists within the frustrated meritocracy latent class, one that resonates with recent studies by Arlie Hochschild (2016) and others. There are, of course, many variants of this dynamic within the interviews, variants that share core features but are expressed in combination with other attributes of this class. For instance, a retired Latina woman who had immigrated from Mexico explained: "Life goes by like that. Paying a house, paying a car, and you can't stop working because they'll take it away. Nothing is yours. You owe everything. It is what it is. I am at ease. . . . At least it's better than what others are going through over in Mexico. . . . Things are difficult over there due to work, safety—things haven't changed."

Again, we see the standard meritocratic trajectory but also a sense of precarity—a threat that "they" will take it all away.[10]

8. The fact that two of our sampled interviews make reference to a Cadillac in this way is striking. It indicates that the welfare queen trope that dates back to the Reagan Era remains salient to some groups and clearly reflects the longstanding distinction between those deserving and undeserving of governmental support (Katz 1989; Edin and Lein 1997; Marrow 2012). We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this connection.

9. "I feel like working families should have more options for college for their children than somebody that's just here illegally. And working families should have more options for healthcare than people that are just here illegally. . . . I don't think I'm a mean person. I want everybody to live a good life, but you gotta work a little bit harder in order to do that. You shouldn't just be given anything for free."

10. A reviewer points out that in all of these examples there is an explicit comparison to others who are worse off and who can be viewed as a threat from below. This is consistent with previous research on the tendency for

Complex Meritocracy

The set of beliefs held by class #2 in our analysis can be described as "complex meritocracy." As described, this group is characterized by its invocation of many different factors, scoring high on all of our variables except religion. Members of this group are much more likely to align with Democrats than the other groups, and they are generally younger, work more, and have higher levels of education and income.

From a demographic and achievement standpoint, this group would most closely resemble the meritocratic ideal. In many ways, they epitomize the belief that the combination of education and hard work will lead to successful social advancement. However, their verbal descriptions of their lives reflect a more complex view of factors related to getting ahead, one that includes multiple structural factors and luck as well as education and hard work.

A distinguishing feature of respondents in this category was their commitment to the idea that education and work are the obvious keys to making it and thriving in modern U.S. society. The cause and effect of these efforts was clearest in this group, often expressed automatically and as if no alternative existed. For example, when one respondent (a younger, Black LGBTQ woman) was asked how her family was making ends meet, she answered this way:

Respondent: We work. We just work day-to-day, job-to-job. Where one might fall short, the other one steps up. It's just something we're used to, we've always done.

Interviewer: You mentioned having a lot of medical bills. Tell me about those and your plan to pay them off?

Respondent: Get a better job to start paying them. It's just too many of them, so much of it. I just got to get a better job.

Another younger respondent who identified as part Native American and part Latino also presented a pragmatic path through which education would lead to getting ahead. When asked about a test they were preparing for, he replied this way:

Respondent: For the [redacted] computer networking certification. So, it's only semi-interesting. [Lots more discussion here of the content and class]

Interviewer: So, what will happen if you get the certificate?

Respondent: I can probably negotiate like a little pay at work or I could just [get] another job that pays more, something like that. It's [a] pretty decent certificate like an introductory intermediate, but yeah.

Aside from their more optimistic view of the ability of their efforts to help them get ahead and more frequent expressions of self-reliance, a key distinction between this group and those from class #1 was the relative lack of frustration or anger over things that are outside of their control, despite acknowledging the same types of struggles. This group recognized the influence of the structural on their outcomes, but they were also more accepting of these external factors. As one young, newly married White woman related,

> I was really stressed out like, "I need a job. I need to make money. I need to go to school. I need to get an education" and, like, I applied to a [redacted] program and I got turned down and that like sucked. [It was] like, "Geez, can't anyone want me?" But so that was really stressful. [But] for some reason, I don't know why, I just felt like this peace. Like, you know what? Like the time's going to come and the right thing is going to come.

Another respondent, a middle-aged White man who had served time in prison, expressed a similar commitment to meritocratic principles of hard work and education along with an awareness of the various ways in which the larger social structure affected aspects of his life story:

(and benefits of) flattering comparisons by those in precarious positions (see, for example, Edwards 2004; Alderson and Katz-Gerro 2016).

> I'm a participant in [a housing assistance program]. I had to go through the shelter system, and I have a roommate. . . . I'm still in struggles, still trying to bring myself up from my bootstraps, as they say. . . . I'm very grateful, okay, because there's a lot of people who work. They have a term now called the working poor. How do those two words even fit together? You're working and you're poor? So, that's a lot of people that can't afford rent or most of their check is going towards rent then they have to penny pinch and try to get food for the table for their kids and themselves and things like that. They give us a TV, we get a phone, it's a nice apartment. There's a lot of people, they still living on the streets. So, I'm very grateful for that.

The repeated references to being grateful are worth noting here. There is obviously some frustration with current economic arrangements, but this frustration is tempered by references to people who are worse off than himself rather than only focusing on what he does not have.

It is important to note that this group—despite its belief in hard work and education—does consistently recognize the structural barriers to getting ahead. Not surprisingly, given the greater diversity of the group, there were many references to barriers based on race and gender. As one young male who identifies as Black and Native American explained: "But you as a Black man . . . [the] racism you will experience in your young life would have been in your community. Mine wasn't until I came here. I've noticed as I've gotten older, its face has changed. It used to be ugly. [Now] it's hidden behind a veneer of makeup."

In general, this group—like those in the frustrated meritocracy class described previously—see the constraints that inhibit a kind of "pure" meritocratic system. Unlike that group, however, members of the complex meritocracy group express far less anger or frustration about these constraints. They see ways forward and, as indicated in their answers to the close-ended questions that accompanied the interviews, their hopefulness cannot be explained away by religious beliefs. It is notable that this group is the most likely to use terms from the education, luck, work and both structure dictionaries compared to the other two groups, but they are simultaneously the least likely to invoke religion in their life narratives. For example, the young woman rejected from nursing school quoted above identifies as a strong conservative but does not attribute her peace about her job struggles to God. Similarly, the Black respondent talking about the face of racism does bring up religion directly but only to say that it's a belief system that "doesn't make a lot of sense these days." In sum, complexity here means the acknowledgment of all explanations but religion.

Detached Meritocracy

Finally, we use the phrase, detached meritocracy, to identify the set of beliefs held by latent class #3 in our analysis. This group, the youngest of the three with a higher percentage of females, urban dwellers, and having children at home, is distinguished by the absence of clear commitments for getting ahead; it is also the least engaged overall across the six dictionaries. Members of this group are in the middle on income measures as well as their commitments to education, religion, and luck. They are, however, the lowest on work and both ascriptive and state structure relative to classes #1 and #2. Politically, they are in the dead center, showing no tendency toward Republican or Democrat. We use the adjective detached to describe this group because that is the tone of many of the interviews, and there is a lack of strong commitment to any of the factors we measure here. But there is also a sense of matter-of-factness in some of the interviews we examined, so detached stands in for a wide variety of related adjectives—such as matter-of-fact, indifferent, accepting, disengaged, apathetic, or alienated—that seem to capture the mood of particular respondents within this group.

Because people in this category are identified by the absence of strong commitments, it is more difficult to illustrate their distinctiveness with selections from the interviews. One of the aspects of these interviews that consistently stands out is the tendency for members of this group to describe their life stories in a low-intensity or matter-of-fact fashion—A led to B, which led to C—with little to no disruption and few expressions of frustration. These stories were more likely to indicate that things "just happened." This middle-aged White male pilot, for instance, epitomizes this matter-of-fact style of life narrative:

> I think now, looking back, [I had a] pretty sheltered life, basically not moving, not moving high schools. . . . So, after that, and even just going to college where I was still close to home, I thought that college wasn't for me and I wasn't to pursue maybe a certain trade. My parents encouraged me to finish college and because I was so close, I mean, I've gone two years already and just stick it out, which I'm glad I did. I got a degree in [redacted] and finished college there.

He goes on to express contentment with how far he has climbed in terms of achievement, and—when asked—said he saw himself in the same place on a ladder of achievement (eight out of ten) in the future. Another respondent (middle-aged White male basketball coach) similarly narrates his life with a low-intensity or "it's all good" type of indifference (for example, he says that he is lucky to have good parents and good genes, notes that he grew up in a good place and had "good support in terms of friends"). He mentions factors that led to his current, successful position, but he does not engage in extended interpretation or sense-making. In interviews like these, there is a sense of privilege in the lack of reflection about the factors that may have provided advantages for life outcomes, and there is often a feeling of a smooth climb. But there is also a notable lack of frustration or bitterness about the system or other structural factors that is also worth noting.

A similar pattern can be seen in this young, Chinese-American pre-med student. When reflecting on possible turning points in her life, she explained,

> The only thing I can think of is when I was a senior and I was trying to decide between my two big choices [of colleges], and I was really at a crossroads between like wanting to start over new in a completely different state and being super independent there versus going with the road much more traveled with [the local state school]. But other than that, I mean, I've been on a pretty set path, most of my life, I knew from the time I was five that I wanted to a be a surgeon and that never really wavered. So, throughout my life, I just had one goal, and up until now at least so far, so good, I'm sticking with it.

She is clear in her goals and recognizes her set path for achieving them. One could imagine more emphasis on the hard work and education necessary for this path to be followed successfully, but they are not invoked here.

Members of class #3 do show medium levels of commitment to education (which is mentioned in both of the previous excerpts), religion, and luck, whereas they score very low on all other factors. Note, for example, the interplay of education, religion, and luck—in conjunction with the lack of engagement related to work or either structure dictionary—from this young Black male:

> But what was interesting was the school I went to. It was [school name], and that just so happened to be like one of the top schools in the whole state. I was going there for free. You know what I'm saying? Because I lived inside the area, I can go there. . . . So, I'm taking like these little mini coding classes and we don't even really realize like that people make 100 grand a year right now that code. And we were as kids, we were just like, oh yeah, we told him we didn't realize like that's setting us up to like have a chance to make a lot of money. You know what I mean? So that was cool.
>
> I'm just grateful that I was in certain situations that was able to play with my mind and make me . . . pull me in different direction. But I could one of these people, I could be selling drugs or in jail like dead and never knew that I loved computers. That was—like that's a real possibility, you know what I mean? But thank God I was able to catch the . . . to be born at the right time, go to the right schools, and catch the wave at the right time,

you know what I mean? Because a lot of people don't survive.

Again, similar to the two older respondents and the pre-med student, there is little talk here of hard work or structural obstacles or struggle in general. In this narrative, the acknowledgment of the role of fortune and God is used to underscore smoothness and "catching the wave" rather than, for example, frustration with the state (class 1) or the need for self to solve problems (class 2).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The word *meritocracy* is commonly used to describe the dominant system of beliefs surrounding how to get ahead in the United States. Our analysis encourages more careful thinking about how this term is used and how people understand it. Specifically, we draw attention to how this broad label can hide meaningful variations and nuances in the ways in which people construct visions of what meritocracy means and how it is constituted. Our text analysis identifies three versions of meritocracy—frustrated, complex, and detached—through the language people use to describe their life trajectories.

Our findings do not show a widespread presence of what we might think of as a belief in a pure or vulgar form of meritocracy in which hard work and skill are all that matters in getting ahead. Instead, it is overwhelmingly common for people to combine meritocratic ideas with a rotating cast of nonmeritocratic factors. These results suggest that more concerted attention to the role that perceptions of nonmeritocratic factors on getting ahead would enrich our understanding of beliefs about social mobility in the United States. It would be valuable to explore in more detail the different ways in which merit and nonmerit beliefs are combined, how they interact to form more general worldviews, and how different accounts of what is out of one's control are associated with different political positions. It is informative, for instance, that the frustrated meritocrats of our study, who are dominantly Republican, score so highly on talk of social structure. It is easy to see how focusing on government and ascriptive characteristics as the most salient outside-of-one's control factors opens the door for acute resentment (as described, for example, in Hochschild 2016) and antigovernment sentiments about public education, taxes, and immigration.

Our approach also makes the case for considering the role that nonrational factors such as luck and religion play in individuals' cognitive maps about life trajectories. For all groups, luck or religion were often included as part of their narratives and for many were listed as causal forces in their life outcomes. Interestingly, for class 1 and class 2 the relationship between these two factors is inverse: class 1 is highest in religion and lowest in luck, and class 2 is lowest in religion and highest in luck. One possibility here is that luck and religion serve the same function in both versions of meritocracy. They both acknowledge forces completely beyond human control (randomness or providence, respectively), but perceive the sources and nature of these forces very differently—a difference that matters a great deal for the construction of their meritocratic frameworks. These nonrational factors and their interactions with other get-ahead factors deserve closer scrutiny.

Finally, this approach has implications for the current political divisions in the United States. The three classes generated by our data are very clearly divided by political identity—class #1 is very Republican, class #2 is very Democratic, and class #3 shows no political leaning whatsoever. These divisions arose despite the fact that these classes were generated purely on verbal expressions related to particular factors related to getting ahead, none of which were explicitly political. This suggests that distinctive views about recipes for getting ahead are strongly tied to political position. It is striking that even though members of all subgroups expressed discontentment with the meritocratic ideal, each of the three groups pointed to different obstacles as the culprits for disrupting the meritocratic process. Again, it is factors outside individual control—how they are defined, to what they are attributed, and by whom—that differentiate people's ideas about getting ahead, and these ideas are intimately tied to politics. These are important relationships to tease out in future work.

Related to these political concerns is the extent to which get-ahead outlooks shape what people do. For example, what do these outlooks say about how individuals make sense and interact with each other? How do these outlooks inform the strategies that individuals adopt with regard to upward (or downward) mobility? How do these outlooks enable or constrain how individuals receive messages from policy makers about, say, the value of education? Our application of dictionary methods cannot establish a causal account of whether linguistic features in conversations directly motivate everyday social actions. But we suspect that they do. For example, our results suggest that those in class #1 share not only political affiliation in name (Republican) but a relatively active frustration from seeing meritocracy thwarted, which could be unifying in terms of interpersonal interaction. In contrast, class #2 is composed of many who share the label Democrat, but they embrace a multidimensional understanding of meritocracy; one member from class #2 might not recognize themselves when interacting with another member of class #2. In this way, we expect that these latent classes would help us understand how people perceive and experience social distance on the ground.

Methodological Implications

To date, research on getting-ahead outlooks has largely been driven by survey data, which gives respondents a preset menu of ideas from which they can choose to endorse. For example, the General Social Survey asks, "Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?" The survey approach, though informative, carries the potential risk of eliciting verbal justifications to specific questions, justifications that are composed to conform with the prevailing meritocratic ideology in American society rather than their true beliefs or courses of actions they would take. This contradiction between discursive or justificatory talks and intuitive, emotion-driven practices has been well documented in cultural sociology (Cerulo 2010; Ignatow 2007; Martin 2010; Vaisey 2009).

Our approach aims to avoid this justificatory dilemma by analyzing the language people use when they have not been prompted to reflect on and rationalize their merit beliefs. By simply listening to how people narrate their lives, we were able to detect meaningful differences in how people deploy beliefs about meritocracy in a naturalistic setting, a setting in which they were not explicitly asked about their beliefs about meritocracy and so were likely less susceptible to the kind of desirability bias that plagues survey research. That noteworthy, qualitative differences in outlooks for getting ahead emerged from this analysis shows how a dominant and universal ideology can take on distinct forms in practice. These forms can serve to reify and brighten existing boundaries tied to social-demographic characteristics and in this way could play a key role in increasing ideological division in the modern United States.

One limitation of our approach is that our measurement of cultural frames cannot be directly linked to respondents' affective valence regarding the influence of latent variables in shaping their lives. For example, the invocation of terms related to education may indicate one's strong conviction that school is the key path to getting ahead, or alternatively, it may reflect one's belief that formal education is useless and overvalued. The advent of large-scale language models, such as the GPT-3 and BERT families, trained on extensive text corpora, presents an opportunity for gaining insight into the subtleties of language that are perceptible only to humans, yet convey crucial cultural or value connotations. Future research is needed to develop finely tuned models capable of identifying the valence and intensity of invoked cultural dispositions in interview texts, and using it to verify the opinions expressed in the form of survey response. Despite the limitations of the methodology, our work provides strong evidence that at least three distinct outlooks are related to meritocratic ideology, and they can be predicted by one's membership in demographic groups.

Along similar lines, our approach does not identify some potentially important contextual nuances of how respondents employ language pertaining to particular meritocratic outlooks. For instance, does the expression of an outlook change when the subject of discussion is the respondent's trajectory as opposed to the trajectory of others (see Sauder 2020)? Or, does the expression of the outlook change when respondents are discussing trajectories of success as opposed to trajectories of failure (see Frank 2016)? This study—offering robust evidence of the existence of distinctive outlooks and their correlations to specific social positions—provides the foundation for future work to explore the conditions under which these outlooks are made most salient.

Table A.1 Luck, Religion, Education Dictionaries

Luck	Religion	Education
luck*	afterlife*	tuition
fortunate	agnost*	colleg*
random*	alla	universit*
destin*	allah*	graduat*
accident*	altar*	school*
fluke	amen	educat*
kismet	angel	GPA
karma	amish	booksmart
windfall	angelic	math*
fortuitous	angels	science*
good break	baptis*	english
bad break	baptiz*	certificat*
lot in life	belief*	juco
fortune	bible*	Bachelor
fate	biblic*	Master student
good fortune	bishop*	Master degree
good luck	bless*	PhD
misfortune	buddh*	JD
bad luck	catholic*	MPH
tough luck	chapel*	MPP
ill luck	chaplain*	academy
blessing*	christ	seminary
mischance*	christen*	conservatory
serendipitous	christian*	alma mater
serendipity	christmas*	ivory tower
fortuitously	church*	academic degree
chancy	clergy	associate degree
chanceful	confess*	bachelor's degree
stochasticity	convent	baccalaureate
stochastic	convents	honours degree
kismat	crucif*	master's degree
happenstance	crusade*	doctor's degree
fortuitousness	demon	doctorate
unlucky	demonic*	law degree
	demons	honorary degree
	devil*	Associate in Arts
	divin*	Associate in Applied Science
	doom*	Associate in Nursing
	episcopal*	Artium Baccalaurens
	evangel*	BSArch
	faith*	first-class honours degree

(*continued*)

Table A.1 (*continued*)

Luck	Religion	Education
	fundamentalis*	Master of Architecture
	gentile*	Master of Arts
	god	Artium Magister
	god's	Master of Arts in Library Science
	goddess*	Master of Arts in Teaching
	gospel*	Master in Business
	hashanah	Master in Business Administration
	heaven*hell	Master of Divinity Master of Education
	hellish	Master of Fine Arts
	hells	Master of Literature
	hindu*	Master of Library Science
	holier	Master in Public Affairs
	holiest	Master of Science
	holy	Master of Science in Engineering
	hymn*	Master of Theology
	imam*	Doctor of Dental Medicine
	immoral*	Doctor of Dental Surgery
	immortal*	Doctor of Divinity
	islam*	Doctor of Education
	jesuit*	Doctor of Medicine
	jesus*	Doctor of Music
	jew	Doctor of Musical Arts
	jewish*	Doctor of Optometry
	jews	Doctor of Osteopathy
	jihad*	Doctor of Arts
	juda*	Doctor of Philosophy
	karma	Doctor of Public Health
	kippur	Doctor of Theology
	koran	Doctor of Sacred Theology
	kosher	Master of Laws
	krishna*	Doctor of Fine Arts
	krisna*	Doctor of Humane Letters
	lord*	Doctor of Humanities
	lutheran*	Doctor of Laws
	mecca	Doctor of Science
	meditat*	Ph.D.
	mennonit*	collegiate
	mercif*	alumnus
	mercy	alumna
	methodis*	alum
	minister*	grad
	ministr*	Ivy League*
	missionar*	commencement
	mitzvah*	student*
	mohamm*	teaching
	monast*	pedagog*
	monk*	co-educate
	moral	coeducate

Table A.1 (*continued*)

Luck	Religion	Education
	morality	scholar*
	morals	coeducation
	mormon*	course of study
	mosque*	course of instruction
	muhamm*	extracurricul*
	mujahid*	work-study program
	musl*	academic*
	nun	faculty
	nun's	lectur*
	nuns	principal*
	orthodox*	teacher*
	pagan*	instructor*
	papal*	home-school
	paradise*	postgraduate
	passover	undergrad*
	pastor*	language teaching
	penance	art class
	pentecost*	correspondence course
	pew	directed study
	piet*	elective course*
	pilgrim*	extension course*
	pious	home study
	pope	orientation course*
	pray	required course*
	prayed	seminar*
	prayer*	shop class*
	praying	professor*
	prays	prof
	praying	chancellor*
	prays	headmaster*
	preach*	headmistress*
	presbyterian*	art teacher*
	priest*	tutor*
	prophe*	teaching fellow
	protestant*	matriculat*
	psalm*	lowerclassman
	purgator*	underclassman
	puritan*	language lesson
	qur'an*	dance lesson
	quran*	music lesson
	rabbi	freshman
	rabbinical	sophomore
	rabbis	self-education
	ramadan	vocational training
	religio*	learning
	rite	grade point average
	rites	credential*
	ritual*	diploma

(*continued*)

Table A.1 (*continued*)

Luck	Religion	Education
	rosaries	
	rosary	
	rosh-hashan*	
	roshhashan*	
	sabbath*	
	sacred	
	sacrific*	
	saint*	
	salvation satan*	
	scriptur*	
	sect	
	sectarian	
	sects	
	seminary	
	shi'*	
	shiite*	
	shrine*	
	sikh*	
	sin	
	sinn*	
	sins	
	soul	
	souls	
	spirit*	
	sunni	
	sunnis	
	temple*	
	testament*	
	theolog*	
	torah	
	vatican*	
	veil*	
	worship*	
	yiddish	
	zen	
	zion*	

Source: Authors' compilation.

Table A.2. Structure 1, Structure 2, and Work Dictionaries

Structure 1	Structure 2	Work	
gender	politic*	absent*	lesson*
racis*	government*	academia	librar*
stratum	authorit*	academic	lsat
social class	regime	academics	ltd
socio-economic class	washington	academies	mailroom*
ethic*	bureaucracy	academy	majoring
poverty	bureaucratic	accomplish*	majors
poorness	govern*	achievable	manage
impoverishment	legislat*	achieve*	manageabl*
racial*	congress*	achievi*	managed
inheritance	democrat*	administr*	management*
underprivileged	republic*	advertising	manager*
poverty-stricken	welfare	advis*	manages
maleness	senator	agencies	managing
femaleness	senate	agency	manufact*
working class	mayor*	agent	market*
proletariat	city manager	agents	masters
lower class	campaigner	ambition	math*
underclass	candida*	ambitions	mcat
middle class	nominee	ambitious	meeting*
bourgeoi*	Communis*	ambitiousness	memo
caste	demagog*	analy*	memos
upper class	Federalis*	applicant*	menial
inherited wealth	Labourite	applicat*	mentor*
aristocratic	machine politician	apprentic*	merger*
ruling class	Mugwump	assign*	mfg
people in power	party boss	assistan*	mgmt
silver spoon	party liner	associate	mgr
old money	socialis*	associated	midterm*
masculin*	statesman	associates	motiv*
bisexual*	national leader	associating	negotiat*
master race	technocrat	association	ngo*
anti-Semitism	Whig	auditorium*	nonprofit*
antisemitism	majority leader	award*	nsfw
white supremacy	minority leader	bank*	occupa*
immigrant class	whip	benefits	office
elite group	party whip	biolog*	officehold*
high society	ex-mayor	biz	offices
heir	leftis*	blackboard*	operat*
inheritor	left-winger	bldg*	org
poor	stateswoman	book*	organization*
destitute	state senator	boss	organize
impoverished	policy-making	bossed	organized
indigent	semipolitical	bosses	organizer*
destitution	authoritarian*	broker*	organizes
indigence	totalitarian*	bureau*	organizing
proletarian	bureaucratism	burnout*	outlin*
lower-class	anti-drug law	busier	outsourc*
low-class	antitrust law	busiest	overpaid
privileged	gubernatorial	business*	overtime

(*continued*)

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Structure 1	Structure 2	Work	
well-off	democracy	busy	overworked
whiteness	public assistance	calculus	paper*
	social insurance	campus*	pay*
	social assistance	career*	pc*
	national assistance	ceo*	pen
	Social Security	certif*	pencil*
	unemployment	cfo*	pens
	compensation	chairm*	pension*
	disability insurance	chairperson	perform*
	old-age insurance	chairw*	phd*
	survivors insurance	challeng*	photocop*
	Medicare	champ*	physics
	Medicaid	chore*	polic*
	senatorial	class	politic*
	senatorship	classes	portfolio*
		classmate	practice
		classmates	practiced
		classroom*	practices
		client*	practicing
		co-work*	prereq*
		collaborate*	presentation*
		collaboration	presiden*
		collaborative	procrastin*
		collaborator*	produc*
		colleague*	prof
		colleg*	profession*
		commerc*	professor*
		committee*	profit*
		commute*	profs
		commuting	program*
		companies	project
		company	projector*
		compet*	projects
		comput*	promot*
		conferenc*	psych
		conglom*	psychol*
		congress*	publish*
		construction*	qualifi*
		consult*	quiz*
		consumer*	read
		corp	rearrang*
		corporat*	recession*
		corps	reconstruct*
		counc*	recruit*
		couns*	register*
		course*	registra*
		cowork*	regulat*
		credential*	reorgani*
		credit*	report*
		crew	requir*

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Structure 1	Structure 2	Work	
		cubicle*	research*
		curricul*	resource
		customer*	resources
		cv*	resourcing
		deadline*	responsib*
		dean*	restructur*
		delegate	resume*
		delegated	retail*
		delegates	retire*
		delegating	retiring
		delegation	review*
		demot*	revis*
		department*	rhetor*
		dept	salar*
		desk*	schedul*
		develop*	scholar
		diplom*	scholarly
		director*	scholars
		dissertat*	scholarship*
		dividend*	scholastic*
		doctor*	school
		dorm*	schooling
		dotcom	schools
		downsiz*	schoolwork
		dropout*	scien*
		duti*	secretar*
		duty	sector*
		earn	semester*
		earned	seminar
		earning	seminars
		earns	senior*
		econ*	servic*
		edit*	session*
		education	shareholder*
		educational	sickday*
		effort*	sickleave*
		efl	skill*
		elementary	sophom*
		employ	staff*
		employed	stapl*
		employee*	start-up*
		employer*	startup*
		employment	stipend*
		entrepreneur*	stock
		errand*	stocked
		esl	stocks
		exam	student*
		exams	studied
		excel	studies
		excelled	studio

(*continued*)

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Structure 1	Structure 2	Work	
		excellence	studios
		excellent	studious
		excelling	study*
		excels	succeed*
		exec	success
		executive*	successes
		factories	successful
		factory	successfully
		facult*	supervis*
		fail*	syllabus*
		fax*	tasks
		feedback	taught
		finaliz*	tax
		finals	taxa*
		financ*	taxed
		fired	taxes
		firing	taxing
		foundation*	teach*
		franchis*	team*
		frat	tenure*
		freshm*	test
		gmat	tested
		goal*	testing
		gov	tests
		govern*	textbook*
		gpa	theses
		grad	thesis
		grade*	toefl
		grading	trade*
		graduat*	trading
		gre	transcript*
		hardwork*	transfer*
		headhunter*	tutor*
		highschool*	typed
		hire	typing
		hired	underclass*
		hires	undergrad*
		hiring	underpaid
		homework*	unemploy*
		housework	universit*
		hr	unproduc*
		inc	upperclass*
		income*	varsit*
		incorp*	vita
		industr*	vitas
		institut*	vocation*
		instruct*	vp*
		interview*	wage
		inventory	wages

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Structure 1	Structure 2	Work	
		invest*	warehous*
		jd	welfare
		job*	work
		junior*	workabl*
		keyboard*	worked
		kinderg*	worker*
		labor*	working
		labour*	works
		laptop*	workshop*
		law*	write
		layoff*	writer*
		lead	writes
		leader*	writing
		leading	written
		leads	wrote
		learn	xerox*
		learned	
		learner	
		learners	
		learning	
		learns	
		learnt	
		lectur*	
		legal	
		legales*	
		legalis*	
		legalit*	
		legaliz*	
		legally	
		legals	

Source: Authors' compilation.

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The Self in Action: Narrating Agentic Moments

Shira Zilberstein, Elena Ayala-Hurtado, Mari Sanchez, and Derek Robey

This article develops a cultural and contextual approach to studying agency that attends to variation in how people narrate their experiences. Drawing on the large-scale, nationally representative American Voices Project data, the article uses computational methods to test patterns in agentic expression and qualitative methods to examine how respondents narrate agency and passivity as they describe their lives. This analysis captures agentic moments, *widespread narratives through which people emphasize their agentic selfhood as they recount specific situations. Moreover, individuals use* narrative moves—*such as shifting their focus and drawing on subtypes of agency—to craft agentic moments despite constraints. We argue that narratives of agency are variable, situational, and often co-occurring with narrative passivity, which enables people to narrate themselves as agentic even in challenging situations.*

Keywords: agency, passivity, narratives, inequality

The concept of agency broadly encapsulates the self in action as people construct goals, plan for the future, make decisions, and develop pathways of action to achieve their objectives (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Markus and Kitayama 2003, 4). Across disciplinary fields, scholars have investigated the many ways that an individual's sense of agency is linked to their well-being and ability to overcome challenges. An increased sense of agency is associated with better educational and health outcomes (Andersson and Hitlin 2022; Bandura 1997; Werner and Smith 2001; Duckworth et al. 2007) and can affect subjective well-being in ways comparable to income (Hojman and Miranda 2018). Contrastingly, a sense of lack of

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agency, or passivity, is associated with uncertainty, anxiety, and emotional distress (Beck 1992; Robinson et al. 1991).

Some scholars have studied agency as a quality that individuals have based on their ability to manipulate their environments, entertain a wide array of choices, and pursue their goals. Research stemming from rational choice and psychological models of human behavior define agency as a personal quality that people do or do not have based on their ability to make choices and further their interests (Gray, Gray, and Wegner 2007; Hedstrom and Swedberg 1996; Jenks 1998). In this literature, agency is assumed to directly contrast with passivity (Jenks 1998). Scholars often use this definition to examine the relationship between agency and stratification, concluding that those in more privileged social positions have access to a wider range of choices, are more easily able to change their circumstances, exert more power over social structures, and thus have more agency. They assert that those in lower social positions face more constraints, are unable to manipulate their environments, are powerless in the face of hardships, and thus have less agency (Boroditsky and Ramscar 2002; Mirowsky and Ross 2007; B. Silver et al. 2021).

In contrast, other scholars have theorized that agency exists on a continuum or have shown that people's subjective understandings and expressions of agency may not directly correspond to the choices available to them or the constraints they face. Some scholars have argued that agency can vary throughout the lifecourse and shift in degree based on contextual features (Abebe 2019; Fuchs 2001). Others have conceptualized agency as part of a fluid process of sensemaking connected to cultural structures (Frye 2012; Silva 2012; Snibbe and Markus 2005). This body of research emphasizes people's subjective sense of agency, which depends on cultural frameworks that influence how people understand their options, choices, and pathways to achieve their goals (Hitlin and Elder 2007; Markus and Kitayama 2003; Silva and Corse 2018). Thus less privileged individuals can creatively respond to the barriers they face and feel a sense of control over their lives despite limited resources (Edin and Schaefer 2015). This sense of agency is critical for individuals to achieve dominant models of worth and value (Lamont 2019; Ho 2023). However, scholarship that studies, measures, and theorizes agency has yet to fully investigate the strategies that people use to position themselves as agentic, even as they narrate challenging contexts, as well as how subjective understandings of agency and passivity interact as individuals describe their experiences.

In this article, we ask how people express their sense of agency as they recount their experiences. Moreover, how do narrations of agency and passivity interact in different moments of people's lives? We draw on the sociological literature on narratives and use computational and qualitative methods to explore narrations of agency within the American Voices Project, a nationally representative large-scale interview dataset.[1] This dataset is uniquely suited for this analysis because of the wide-ranging scope of the interviews, which purposely cover many different aspects of respondents' lives. We first draw on computational methods to test large-scale patterns in agentic expression drawing on scholarship on agency and stratification. We explore agentic expression between individuals and investigate how agentic expressions can vary within the same person. Subsequently, to understand variations in narrations of agency, the interaction between narrative agency and passivity, and how people can narrate agency in constraining

1. We use interviews as evidence of shared frameworks and classification systems that shape people's understandings of their environments and actions (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013), rather than as evidence of internal states or feelings (C. Silver et al. 2021; Moore 2016). Within our approach, interviews always involve an aspect of presentation of the self (Goffman 1959), raising questions about the resources, norms and ideals people draw on to interpret and express their identities and actions. We thus analyze people's narrative depictions of their environments and capabilities, in line with established research using interviews and narrative analysis (Bruner 1991; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Ho 2023; Silva 2012).

contexts, we perform a qualitative analysis on a subsample of data.

Through this multimethod approach, we develop the concept of agentic moments, or discrete moments in which individuals across social groups narrate agency in different contexts and despite facing constraints that may be thought of as limiting choice and agency. Agentic moments encompass specific situations, defined as actors and their settings, in which people narrate their agentic capacity when facing concrete challenges (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967; Tavory 2018). Our concept of agentic moments foregrounds the intersections and co-occurring nature of agency and passivity and recognizes individuals' abilities to narrate agency in challenging situations. Furthermore, we identify common narrative moves: planned or unplanned narrative strategies that shift the focus of narratives or draw on different ways of claiming agency to support agentic moments. Thus we argue that people narrate themselves as agentic in ways that are variable, situational, and often co-occur with narrative passivity.

By developing the concept of agentic moments and identifying the narrative moves that enable these moments, we contribute a cultural and contextual model that captures the variability of agency, its co-occurrence with passivity, and how people use narratives to present themselves agentically. Furthermore, we use a mixed-methods analysis of an unprecedented nationally representative dataset of wide-ranging interviews to demonstrate the applicability of our concepts across diverse people, contexts, and themes. Thus, we extend work that has shown that people tend to present themselves as agentic (Silva and Corse 2018; Ho 2023), even in particularly challenging or constraining circumstances (Enck and McDaniel 2015; Charmaz 2002), as well as work that has shown that a person's narrative of self can become more (or less) agentic over time (Polkinghorne 2007).

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF AGENCY

We first explain research stemming from rational choice and psychological models of human behavior that define agency and passivity as contrasting qualities that individuals have based on their ability to exercise personal choice and control. We then explain research that challenges this conception through a cultural and contextual account of agency.

Agency and Passivity

In a tradition extending back to Aristotle, scholars have differentiated between people who act and people who are acted upon (Reader 2007). Traditionally in the social sciences, a rational choice and psychological model of agency dominated. In this model, agency is seen as a discrete quality possessed and enacted by people who act purposefully, intentionally, and methodically to pursue their personal interests (Fuchs 2001; Hedstrom and Swedberg 1996; Kahneman 2003; Parsons 1951). Related concepts across disciplines include self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), locus of control (Wallston and Wallston 1982), autonomy (Sayer 2011), and capabilities (Sen 1999). In contrast, passivity has been conceptualized as the opposite of agency to describe a lack of control or constraints imposed by external forces that limit choice and command over one's environment (Jenks 1998). In this literature, passive individuals are those who receive, feel, desire, or experience in ad hoc, uncontrolled, or overly structured ways (Gray, Gray, and Wegner 2007; Gray and Wegner 2009; Jenks 1998; Parsons 1951). Passivity has been associated with the concepts of patiency (Ash, Stammbach, and Tobia 2021; Burkitt 2016), learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier, and Seligman 1995), perpetual waiting or resignation (Duncan 2015), and unreflective feeling or experience (Schweitzer and Waytz 2021). The literature depicts passive individuals as unable to work toward or achieve goals, overcome challenges, or express control over their life circumstances. Passivity has been less developed as a concept and is most frequently conceptualized as the lack of agentic qualities. Scholarship theorizes the relationship between agency and passivity (Burkitt 2016; Reader 2007), but has yet to empirically study interactions between the two concepts.

The conceptualization of agency as a quality held and enacted, contrasted with passivity, and connected to individual action, choice, and interests has become a central component of research on agency and stratification. In this research, people with access to more resources or privilege have more choice and control in acting on their preferences, planning and achieving their futures, and affecting their environments (Kohn 1989; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Pattillo 2013). In contrast, those with less privilege or access to resources face more constraints, fewer choices, and less control over their environments (Edin and Schaefer 2015; Desmond 2012; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Lachman and Weaver 1998; Silva 2012). From this theoretical vantage point, disadvantage and hardship impose increased constraints that limit people's choices and agency. For example, research on social class suggests that differences in agentic dispositions begin to develop in childhood: middle-class children learn to actively express and reach their desires, goals, and needs, whereas lower-class children learn a sense of constraint (Lareau 2002). As this example shows, researchers studying agency suggest that privileged groups have more agency, whereas less privileged groups face more constraints that limit their agency.

Agency as Continuous, Variable, and Cultural

This rational choice and psychological conceptualization of agency and passivity as qualities individuals possess has been challenged in a number of ways. First, the theoretical literature has conceptualized agency as highly variable and existing on a continuum with passivity. Second, cultural scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding people's subjective understandings and narrations of agency. We build from these bodies of literature to develop a narrative and situational conceptualization of agency.

First, some scholarship has suggested that agency and passivity may be fluid—both existing on a continuum and highly variable between contexts and people. Theoretical scholarship argues that agency and passivity are relative and interdependent; consequently, they often occur to varying degrees (Abebe 2019; Burkitt 2016; Fuchs 2001) and in relation to one another (Gomart and Hennion 1999; Reader 2007). As a result, people's agency varies based on contextual features, shifting over time and between contexts. Moreover, researchers have shown that agency is variable even between individuals with the same demographic characteristics. For example, Anthony Jack (2016) shows that lower-income undergraduates at an elite university, because of different high school environments, were more or less proactive in engaging with professors and seeking help at their university. Although this body of research theorizes agency and passivity as existing on a continuum—rather than as a binary—and recognizes the variability of agency, it does not examine how agency and passivity in fact co-occur and interact in specific contexts.

Second, beyond considering agency as a quality or capacity that people have, some scholars have demonstrated the significance of people's subjective understandings and expressions of agency. In this research, people construct and express agency through their interpretations of who they are and what they can do, which ascribes meaning to their realities (Bruner 1991; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Fuchs 2001; Correll 2004; Silva and Corse 2018). People can interpret their abilities to manipulate their circumstances, make decisions about their lives, and influence social structures (Sewell 1992); they can interpret themselves as having choice or being guided by fate or luck (Abend 2018; Sauder 2020; Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011). People generally draw on their resources, skills, and knowledge to narrate an interpretive understanding of themselves as agentic and able to affect the course of their lives (Ho 2023; Silva 2012). Subjective understandings and expressions of agency have been studied through different cultural structures, including frames (Fuchs 2001), accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968; Damaske 2013), imaginings (Frye 2012; Mische 2009; Zilberstein, Lamont, and Sanchez 2023), and feelings or judgments (C. Silver et al. 2021). In line with the theorization of agency as existing along a continuum, people can interpret varying levels of control over different spheres of life, issues, timehorizons, or scales (Hitlin and Elder 2007; Mische 2009). However, this literature does not study passivity or the relationship between the two concepts.

Finally, scholarship highlights how subjective understandings of agency in relation to individual choice, goals, and decisions are reinforced within Western, neoliberal societies that ascribe value to an autonomous self (Lamont 2019; Markus and Kitayama 2003; Markus 2017). American culture assigns moral value to this conception of agency—individuals should be autonomous and independent because they are less worthy people when they are constrained or dependent (Burkitt 2016; Reader 2007). As a result, individuals strive to find opportunities to construct themselves as agentic in order to achieve a sense of value and worth (Lamont 2019; Ho 2023). In contexts of constraint, individuals reinterpret their environments by focusing on what is within their control and pursuing the criteria for social worth that are available to them (Anderson 1999; Willis 1977). A cultural and contextual conceptualization of agency challenges the assumption that people in disadvantaged positions understand and describe themselves as having less agency simply because they face increased structural barriers (Edin and Lein 1997; Edin and Schaefer 2015) or because they may narrate agency and choice differently than more advantaged people (Abend 2018; Markus and Kitayama 2003; Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011). The importance of constructing an agentic self to claim moral worth highlights the need to understand strategies through which people narrate agency even in the face of constraints.

FROM AGENCY TO AGENTIC MOMENTS

To understand how people express agency in various aspects of their lives, we analyze how people use narratives (McAdams 1993; Somers 1994; Ewick and Silbey 2003; Polletta et al. 2011) to position themselves as agentic in specific situations (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967; Tavory 2018). We inductively develop the joint concepts of agentic moments and narrative moves, through which we argue that people's narratives of agency are variable, situational, and often co-occurring with narrative passivity, enabling people to narrate themselves as agentic even in challenging situations.

We turn to narratives to examine people's expressions of agency because narratives are structured stories through which people interpret their lives (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Polletta et al. 2011). Through stories, individuals can remember and retell events from their lives in ways that allow them to feel as though they had control over their circumstances, acted intentionally, and fulfilled agentic norms. Thus narratives are ideal for analyzing how people express their agency (and passivity) in particular contexts. Moreover, narratives are crucial to constructing a sense of identity (McAdams 1993; Somers 1994). Whereas past work shows how people assert virtuous identities by narrating agentic imagined futures (Frye 2012; Ayala-Hurtado 2021; Zilberstein, Lamont, and Sanchez 2023) or justifying past experiences in interaction (Scott and Lyman 1968; Damaske 2013), we use narratives to understand how people recount their pasts as agentic to cultivate an agentic presentation of self (Enck and McDaniel 2015; Goffman 1959). Through these stories, individuals construct agentic identities, allowing them to claim moral worth and sustain a basis of self that they can extend into their imagined futures (Frye 2012; Somers 1994).

Furthermore, we draw on theoretical research that presents agency as contextual and on a continuum to understand people's narrations of agency as both situational and intertwining with passivity. First, we analyze specific situations—defined as actors and their settings (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967; Tavory 2018)—in which people narrate aspects of their lives more or less agentically. Second, just as agency and passivity may shift along a continuum based on context (Abebe 2019; Burkitt 2016; C. Silver et al. 2021), people may also narrate varying levels of agency and passivity, and even both together in different discrete situations. For instance, an individual might experience constraints, such as poverty or medical diagnoses, that lead them to describe themselves as generally powerless within a given situation; however, these same challenges may also position individuals to narrate themselves as agentically developing creative solutions for the problem at hand. Thus the stories people tell about their lives may incorporate different levels and expressions of agency within specific contexts and may even fluidly incorporate descriptions of agency and passivity within the same context.

We thus inductively develop a situational conceptualization of people's narrations of agency, which we term agentic moments. Agentic moments function as narratives in which people describe themselves as acting agentically in particular situations.[2] These moments can be brief, can be composed of different ways of claiming agency, and can be closely intertwined with descriptions of passivity. The concept of agentic moments is not applicable in instances where individuals narrate a situation entirely passively.

Agentic moments are often facilitated by narrative moves through which individuals adapt narrations of their realities, and particularly of situations in which they encounter constraints, in ways that help them envision themselves as the protagonists of their lives. The concept of narrative moves explains how people construct agentic selfhood through narration. These planned or unplanned narrative strategies manifest in at least two ways. First, when considering their ability to affect their environments, individuals may shift the focus of their narrative—whether spatially, temporally, or socially—to create opportunities to enact an agentic self (Sanchez, Lamont, and Zilberstein 2022; Ayala-Hurtado 2021). Second, people may draw on different ways of claiming agency to emphasize their agentic selves. Agency can range widely, including planning, deciding, or acting in relation to one's goals, but these types of agency have seldom been considered separately. When individuals find that some types of agency are unavailable to them, other types can help them maintain a sense of agentic selfhood. For instance, in situations marked by concrete challenges that effectively eliminate choice, individuals may still deploy narrative moves to claim agentic selfhood by narrating their active decision to do nothing (Willis 1977). Consequently, even amid a general lack of control, individuals can identify moments through which they can maintain a narrative of the agentic self.

In summary, we investigate narrativized agentic moments, focusing on how individuals narrate themselves as agentic as they describe situations across many spheres of life—including difficult situations in which individuals confront serious constraints. Although structural inequalities undoubtedly shape the choices and resources available to people, we show how people across socioeconomic strata, ethnoracial categories, and other dimensions of privilege narrate agentic moments, and we provide examples of narrative moves that enable individuals to maintain these agentic narratives.

DATA AND METHODS

The American Voices Project, a large-scale dataset designed to enable researchers to study people's experiences and perspectives in the United States across a wide range of topics, is an ideal dataset to study people's narrations of agency (for project details, see Edin et al. 2024, this issue). It boasts a nationally representative sample through cluster sampling across census tracts and includes survey and interview data. Interviews in the dataset were collected between 2019 and 2022. The narrative structure of the interviews provides data about how people understand their actions and situate themselves in relation to a variety of domains of life—including work, family, personal finances, health, interpersonal relationships, and more. Given their tremendous scope, these data provide unique analytical leverage that research on agency has not had access to. The data reveal how respondents narrate their agency and passivity without specific reference to either concept (Ahearn 2001; Fausey et al. 2010), which would be more likely to elicit socially desirable responses, that is, descriptions of a more agentic self (Tavory 2020), rather than reveal the resources and strategies used to narrate agentic selfhood.

We iteratively combined computational and qualitative methods to leverage the breadth and depth of the data and verify our findings (Chakrabarti and Frye 2017; Nelson 2020, 2021). Powerful computational methods provided tools to reveal large-scale patterns in individuals' expressions along an agency-passivity con-

2. Although we do not discuss them specifically in this article, passive moments are narratives in which people describe themselves as experiencing a lack of agency in particular situations, in which their choices are limited, and they experience constraints.

tinuum and narrow the analytic focus to the level of the situation, while qualitative methods allowed us to dig deeper into the narrative data (Voyer et al. 2022).

We began by inductively reading forty randomly selected interviews to familiarize ourselves with the data and identify themes related to agency and passivity for further analysis. We paid particular attention to the ways that respondents described their agency and passivity and the parts of the interview in which these themes arose. Given the varied contexts and sections in which relevant themes occurred and the idiosyncratic structure of the semistructured interviews, we decided to analyze the entire interview texts, allowing us to assess agentic narrations in a variety of situations.

Concept Mover's Distance Model

We then turned to a computational analysis, developing a measure of agency for the interviews using the concept mover's distance (CMD) method (Taylor and Stoltz 2020; Stoltz and Taylor 2019). This method has recently been used to discern cultural schemas and frames in a variety of contexts (Taylor and Stoltz 2020; Carbone and Mijs 2022; Daenekindt and Schaap 2022; Voyer et al. 2022). CMD relies on word embeddings, a popular method in the computational social sciences (Kozlowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019; Durrheim et al. 2022; Boutyline and Soter 2021). Word embedding algorithms use massive, digitized text corpuses to create high-dimensional vector spaces in which each word in the training corpus is represented as a vector within the space. Thus each word is positioned distinctively within the vector space. Words that frequently co-occur, appearing in semantically similar contexts and understood to have related meanings, are positioned near one another in the vector space, whereas those with more dissimilar meanings are positioned further apart. If, for example, the words *agency* and *control* appear in semantically similar contexts in the training corpus, they would be positioned near one another in the vector space.

CMD builds on this technique and "word mover's distance" (Kusner et al. 2015) with the intention of measuring concept engagement in texts. To do so, it calculates the similarity between a given document's words and a concept, operationalized as an ideal pseudo-document that includes only words related to that specific concept. For instance, if the pseudo-document contains only the word *agency*, some documents' words would be closer in the vector space to this one-word document and thus expected to more strongly invoke the cultural idea of agency, while those of other documents would be further away. An important characteristic of CMD is that the word or words in the concept-specific pseudo-document (say, *agency*) do not need to explicitly appear in the documents to measure their distance to the concept. For example, if *agency* and *control*, as well as other similar words, are positioned near one another, the inclusion of words like *control* in the analyzed documents would signal a closeness to the concept of agency, even if the word *agency* does not appear in the document. For this reason, CMD is a more robust method than a dictionary method that depends on the specific words researchers choose to include in the dictionary.[3]

Because of the complexity of the concept of agency, we drew on the semantic directions subtype of CMD (Taylor and Stoltz 2021), which creates a pseudo-document based on the average of a researcher-compiled list of words rather than a single word.[4] The semantic directions method uses antonym pairs

3. Other methods are possible; for example, Almog Simchon, Britt Hadar, and Michael Gilead (2023) operationalize agentive language based on the use of active versus passive voice in statements. CMD has the benefit of foregrounding the meaning of language more broadly, taking into account how respondents describe specific actions, rather than focusing narrowly on verb tenses.

4. We decided not to use another subtype of CMD, centroid analysis, which also allows the inclusion of multiple initial terms, because in a centroid CMD model words referring to alternatives to a focal concept (like hate to love or passivity to agency), will be located more closely to words related to the focal concept than if they were completely unrelated (Stoltz and Taylor 2019). This makes these models less suitable for our purposes because the lower boundary of the range of agency has no meaning or direction. We ran centroid models of agency and

rather than words, such as liberal-conservative (Taylor and Stoltz 2020). This method has the added benefit of allowing us to measure agency and passivity along a continuum, as some theorizations of agency have suggested (Abebe 2019; Fuchs 2001; C. Silver et al. 2021). We created a list of twenty-one antonym pairs (for example, decisive-indecisive) that were linked to the extremes of an agency-passivity continuum; the majority of the words on the agency side were categorized as firmly agentic in previous research (see especially Ash, Stammbach, and Tobia 2021, table 1; Sayer 2011; Schweitzer and Waytz 2021, appendix A), while the rest were developed inductively from our qualitative reading of the data (see table A.1). Documents with higher numbers on this measure had words closer to the concept of agency, while those with lower numbers were closer to the concept of lack of agency, or passivity.

To run the models, we read all interviews into R and isolated speech labeled interviewee, interviewee 1, or participant to capture relevant respondent text and exclude text spoken by the interviewer. Our sample includes 1,521 interviews.[5] We also segmented interviews into two-hundred-word chunks with twenty-five-word overlaps to account for variation within interviews, more easily identify the most meaningful parts of the texts, and account for the arbitrariness of segment boundaries (Chakrabarti and Frye 2017; Sherin 2013; Voyer et al. 2022).[6] We dropped segments with less than 15 words, resulting in 95,813 segments.[7] For both full and segmented datasets, we cleaned the text to remove numbers, symbols, whitespace, punctuation, and meaningless words.[8] To generate the CMD models, we used the fastText word embedding tool common in social science research, trained on billions of web pages from the Common Crawl (Stoltz and Taylor 2019; Taylor and Stoltz 2020; Voyer et al. 2022).[9]

We ran a CMD semantic directions analysis on the full interviews to obtain an overall ranking of respondents along the continuum of agency to passivity, as well as on the segments to reveal differences within respondents. This method produces a number for each interview or interview segment that represents how closely the text aligns with the concept of agency, positive numbers, or passivity, negative numbers (for descriptive statistics, see table 1). We also calculated the number of words respondents spoke to account for their talkativeness. We used quantitative methods to analyze the distribution of expressions of agency and passivity and identify pat-

passivity. Using a qualitative test for comprehension and quantitative tests for consistency, we found that these models captured the top end of agency or passivity but did not capture the range of experiences of agency and became less comprehensible the farther from the most extreme edge of the cases. For these reasons, we found the centroid models unsuitable for analysis.

5. Ninety-seven interviews were dropped from the sample because they were mislabeled or not fully translated into English.

6. We ran models with segments of different length and found that two-hundred-word chunks yielded the most coherent and succinct segments.

7. Respondents' narratives often extend over more than one segment. This does not pose a problem to our analysis since our analysis is not dependent on counting agentic-passive incidents.

8. We used the standard English Stopword package and customized it to our dataset. We added back in 107 words that were meaningful in our analysis, such as pronouns (she, they), common verbs (think, can, do) and adverbs (immediately, likely). We cleaned an additional fifty-nine words specific to the corpus such as "ah", "hum" and "mis." We tested the sensitivity of models to different Stopword lists and found that this list produced the most coherent results.

9. We chose fastText over word2Vec, more commonly used in sociology because fastText is a newer method that breaks down words more granularly, the creators of CMD and previous scholars using CMD used fastText (Taylor and Stoltz 2020; Voyer et al. 2022), and because of the available pre-trained dictionary trained on the Common Crawl.

Table 1. Model Descriptive Statistics

Model	Min	Max	Median
Whole interviews	−3.53	7.66	−0.05
Segmented interviews	−4.30	5.14	−0.03

Source: Authors' calculations.

terns.[10] In doing so, we extend theories that conceptualize agency as a continuum to study narrations of agency (Abebe 2019; Burkitt 2016; C. Silver et al. 2021).

To date, no standardized validation measures for CMD models have been established. Therefore, like earlier research (Voyer et al. 2022), we relied on a mixture of qualitative and interpretive checks to ensure that the model captured the concepts of agency and passivity. First, we qualitatively analyzed the thirty most and the thirty least agentic segments. Overall, the segments made sense to the researchers and captured themes and language expected to be more or less associated with agency or passivity. Second, we compared the one hundred most frequent words in the top 5 percent (most agentic) and bottom 5 percent (most passive) of the sample. The results show that segments from the top 5 percent frequently incorporated words we would expect to be associated with agency, such as *change*, *use*, and *savings*, that are related to intentional and goal-driven action.[11] Segments from the bottom 5 percent more frequently included words we would expect to be closely associated with passivity, such as *pain*, *depressed*, and *couldn't*, that respondents used to describe constraints or feelings of helplessness. We understood these checks as indicating that the model appropriately captured agency and passivity.

Qualitative Analysis

To understand the meaning of agency in specific situations, we qualitatively coded a subsample of interview segments. A qualitative analysis of segments allowed us to find and access respondents' narratives. Using the results of the semantic directions model, we randomly selected five hundred segments from the top 5 percent (most agentic), five hundred from the bottom 5 percent (most passive), and three hundred from the middle 5 percent.[12] The segments in the top and bottom 5 percent had scores higher than 1.5 or lower than -1.5, which previous studies using CMD considered substantial (Carbone and Mijs 2022; Voyer et al. 2022). This sampling strategy allowed us to analyze how agency and passivity manifest in respondents' narratives in a variety of situations. Situations could extend over multiple segments, and segments could contain multiple situations. We coded the segments in NVivo; we focused on coding narrations of agency or passivity. We also coded for different spheres of life, like career, family, health, or politics; social scale, like individual, interpersonal, community, or society; and specific constraints, such as discrimination, substance use or addiction, poverty or financial hardship, or incarceration, among others.

While conducting the qualitative coding, we were typically unaware of the metadata attached to each segment that labeled the text

10. We use demographic variables as coded by AVP (see table A.2). We recode college completion as a binary between those with and without a college degree, because having a college degree is significantly related to various socioeconomic and life outcomes (Autor 2014; Case and Deaton 2021; Dickson and Harmon 2011; Hout 2012). Our analysis holds when using a more fine-grained measure of educational attainment.

11. In the case of savings, we saw repeatedly as we analyzed our data that both low- and high-income respondents routinely referred to building their savings or gradually saving money in agentic ways to plan for their futures, expand their alternatives, and achieve specific goals.

12. These 1,300 segments came from 788 respondents in the sample.

as more agentic or passive; this information was stored separately from the narrative segments. Nonetheless, throughout the analysis, we were surprised by how frequently we identified brief narratives of agency in segments that the CMD model had labeled as highly passive, or brief narratives of passivity in segments the CMD model had labeled as highly agentic. In these cases, our in-depth qualitative analysis was able to identify narratives of agency and passivity within segments that by and large were representative of the other end of the continuum. For instance, a segment in which a respondent described her medical condition might be computationally labeled as passive and might seem largely passive on close reading because the respondent was describing hardships and blocked opportunities due to a medical disability. At the same time, our in-depth analysis could identify brief moments of agency as the respondent recounted learning how to manage this medical condition. Because the computational and qualitative analyses focus on distinct analytic structures (the general use of language in the segment versus the narrative meaning of words in the situation), and because the CMD model assigns a numeric value to each segment along a continuum, it does not invalidate our analysis for a segment categorized as highly passive by the computational analysis to still include agentic language. These insights led us to a theorization and analysis of the interactions and coexistence of agency and passivity (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). We draw quotes primarily from the interview segments in our subsample, as well as occasionally drawing on contextual information from the full interviews around those segments.

FINDINGS

We first draw on quantitative methods to understand the distribution of expressions of agency and passivity across the sample—including both between respondents and within respondents. We then turn to a qualitative analysis of select interview segments to develop the concept of agentic moments and identify narrative moves.

Agency and Demographics: A Quantitative Analysis

We drew on a quantitative analysis to understand how expressions of agency and passivity were distributed along the agency-passivity continuum within our sample—including both among the full-text interview transcripts and among the two-hundred-word interview segments. We employed MLE regression methods on the sample of full interviews with demographic variables such as gender, age, race-ethnicity, and educational attainment as independent variables and the CMD score for each interview as the dependent variable (see table 2).[13] The results demonstrate that some privileged characteristics, specifically, having a college education or identifying as a man, are significantly correlated with higher values along the agency-passivity continuum ($p < .05$ for gender (man = 1) and $p < .001$ for education), suggesting that people with these characteristics are likely to use more agentic language to describe their experiences. Meanwhile, other characteristics associated with inequality, including race and income, are not significantly correlated with different values. These results are in line with some previous scholarship about the relationship between privilege and agency, notably work on education and gender (Duncan 2015; Lareau 2002; Mirowsky and Ross 2007). However, the results are inconsistent with scholarship on other forms of privilege, especially regarding income (Kohn 1989; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009).

Given our interest in exploring variable and fluid narrations of agency, we then drew on descriptive statistics to further understand patterns in expressions of agency for individual people. We investigated whether there was more variance in agency-passivity CMD scores between different respondents

13. We controlled for the length of each text to account for more and less talkative respondents who would, overall, have varying opportunities to describe agency or passivity. We included sampling weights and employed listwise deletion.

Table 2. Regression of CMD Score and Demographic Characteristics

Results	CMD Score
Total household income (log)	−0.016
College education	0.610***
Father's college education	−0.127
White	0.090
Man	0.224*
Age	−0.003
Text length	−0.00002*
Constant	0.208
N	954
Log likelihood	−1,581.174
AIC	3,178.35

Source: Authors' calculations.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

(inter-interview variance) or between different segments of the same respondent's interview (intra-interview variance). To do so, we calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient using the segments as observations and the respondents as clusters. This analysis produced a value of 0.15883. This value indicates that there is much more variance in agency-passivity CMD scores within clusters—that is, between interview segments within the same respondent—than between clusters—that is, between different respondents. This finding is in line with the research on cultural and contextual studies of agency that recognizes variation in experiences of agency over the life course or based on contextual factors (Abebe 2019; Frye 2012), showing that expressions of agency are also variable. Such a finding is not unexpected because respondents are discussing a wide range of topics in the data; however, these results also bolster our intuition that analyzing expressions of agency at the level of the individual masks variation of within-individual expressions of agency, including how agency manifests in constraining situations and in relation to passivity. We turn to the qualitative data to conduct an interpretive analysis that allows us to understand how agency functions at the level of the situation and develop the concept of agentic moments.

Qualitative Findings

We develop the concept of agentic moments by showing instances in which narratives of agency vary within individuals and in which narratives of agency are evident in constraining situations. First, we demonstrate instances of within-individual variation in the use of agentic (and passive) narratives in different situations. Second, we assess and analyze the co-occurring nature of descriptions of agency and passivity within a respondent's narrative of a single situation. Finally, we highlight two narrative moves that facilitate agentic moments in the face of obstacles that may be thought of as limiting agency.

Intra-Individual Agentic and Passive Moments

Respondents often narrated substantial agency in some situations while narrating substantial passivity in other situations, emphasizing the importance of understanding narratives of agency as situationally dependent. We demonstrate this finding by drawing from respondents with more than one segment in our qualitative subsample, where one segment was quantitatively coded as the top 5 percent on the agency-passivity continuum and qualitatively coded as agentic, and the other was quantitatively coded as the bottom 5 percent on the continuum and qualitatively coded as passive. Sixty of the 788 respondents included in the subsample—7.6 percent—belonged in this most extreme group.[14]

For example, Melissa, a White woman whose household total income was low and who did not have a bachelor's degree, primarily used passive language as she described abusive relationship dynamics with her former partner and the father of her children. In the segment coded as highly passive, Melissa described an incident of domestic violence: "I screamed for somebody to call the cops but nobody [did]. My daughter, she was [a toddler]. She was sitting right there on the edge of the bed. It was a small room. There was the bed, the entertainment center. . . . and that's where he threw me. She was on the edge of the bed watching the whole thing, screaming." In this segment, Melissa primarily narrated a moment of passivity—she described herself as thrown around, as unable to get away from her partner, and as incapable of protecting her screaming daughter who was a painful witness to the event—which Melissa later described as having had long-lasting repercussions for her child. Although she narrated a brief example of agency through her cry for help, she overwhelmingly described the situation using passive language.[15]

Although Melissa generally narrated situations relating to her abusive relationship passively, she narrated situations related to some other aspects of her life highly agentically. In particular, she repeatedly voiced her profound determination to make a better life for her children, especially with regard to education. She described her persistence in advocating on her children's behalf, which she said had earned her a reputation at school. In the segment coded as highly agentic, Melissa described her relationship with the school principal, with whom she was frustrated due to his lack of action in fixing issues at the school: "I've been in [the principal's] office a couple times talking to him. . . . If I feel like you're not taking care of my kids, right, then I'm going to come up there and we're going to have a problem. . . . I've gone up there and gone off how many times. They get to the point where they know me. They know my voice." Melissa remained steadfast in voicing these issues to the principal; her dissatisfaction with the school did not lead her to narrate herself as resigned or as believing the conditions were unalterable. She described how she directed her communications to a specific actor as a catalyst for problem-solving. She proudly noted that her children were doing well in school and earning distinctions as honor roll students.

Not only was Melissa capable of narrating different facets of her life agentically and passively, but the two facets were interconnected through their relationship to her children. In the passive segment, Melissa narrated a violent experience where she had felt unable to act, focusing intently on her daughter's presence and negative reaction, and, implicitly, her inability to protect her. In the active segment, Melissa described the intense energy she devoted to caring for her daughter and her other child, invoking powerful language that reclaimed her agency: "if . . . you're not taking care of my kids . . . we're going to have a problem."

Other respondents similarly revealed how expressions of agency and passivity are situationally dependent. For example, Natalie, a more privileged respondent—a biracial woman whose household income was high—described herself as a workaholic unhappy with her job. However, she narrated her imagined career trajectory in a highly agentic way: "whatever I do, it's gotta be with helping [others]. Only cause of where I come from . . . I just see it to be different to where I'm not stressing out trying to make it to a job that really doesn't care about their employees . . . when my business open up, it will be a totally different atmosphere because I've been through what people go through. So, I'm hoping that five years from now or a year

14. To protect confidentiality, we use broad racial (White, Black, or biracial), educational (bachelor's degree or not), and household income (low = \$35,000 per year or less, high = \$100,000 per year or more) categories.

15. We discuss the co-occurrence of narratives of agency and passivity, which was very common across the interviews, in the following section.

from now that I will be closer to that." Natalie narrated her professionally oriented agency through her belief in a better professional future for herself in which she would be able to make a difference and support others at work. Implicitly, she connected this agency to her own previously precarious work trajectory.

In contrast, Natalie expressed passivity when describing her relationship with her father, referring to it as a trauma. In the segment coded as highly passive, she described her feelings when her father was arrested: "I said, 'This is some bullshit. He got arrested?' . . . And we wound up going down to the Central Booking. It's so embarrassing. It's not as bad as it is hurtful. Right, so, painful, hurtful, however you want to describe it . . . we sitting in the courts, in the middle of the fucking night. When my father came, I was so embarrassed about how he looked. And we waited." Natalie's repeated descriptions of the hurt, pain, and embarrassment she felt, as well as her experience waiting, indicate a narrative of passivity. She felt powerless and unable to intervene in the situation. These segments exemplify the ways in which people narrate some experiences as passive and others as agentic, even sometimes, as in Melissa's case, using the two experiences as counterpoints.

Co-Occurrence of Agentic and Passive Moments

Furthermore, we show that narratives of agency and passivity are not only drawn on by the same respondent in different situations, but frequently co-occur and enable each other in the same situation. We turn to segments narrated by respondents that the prior literature or our computational analysis would associate primarily with expressions of passivity because of characteristics associated with increased constraints (low education or socioeconomic status). Our analysis finds concurrent narratives of agency and passivity, even as respondents narrated difficult circumstances. Our concept of agentic moments captures the simultaneous and co-constitutive nature of agentic and passive narratives and the ways in which constraining challenges often enable agentic responses.

For example, Dan, a White man with no college degree and a low household income, described an encounter with the police in which he felt powerless: "[I] just was wandering on a walk and what happened is that . . . police swarmed me. They tasered me but God protected me. The taser did connect, I felt the electrical current but didn't flop around like a fish, didn't feel pain, you know. I just felt a tingling sensation. God was definitely protecting me. The cop just approached me." Violent police encounters are situations in which civilians frequently experience limited choices, powerlessness, and pressures to submit, qualities associated with passivity. Additionally, given the association between educational attainment and agency-passivity in our regression results and in previous research, Dan's lack of a four-year college degree would make crafting an agentic identity and experience less accessible. Indeed, Dan narrated the instant that the police tasered him using passive language. His description of the unexpected nature of the encounter, in which "the cop just approached me" when he was "wandering on a walk" enhanced his narrativization of himself as passive: lacking knowledge about why the event occurred and control over its occurrence. Further, his invocation of God credited his sensations to an external entity, locating agency and protection outside of the self, and emphasizing a lack of ability to change or control the situation.

However, Dan simultaneously expressed agency as he described his ability to resist police action, narrated the situation as an instance of unlawful arrest, and revealed plans to pursue legal action. In the moment of the police contact, he described how he "wrestled with the rest of [the police]." He positioned himself as exerting effort to actively change the course of the event. He continued to describe the situation as a "kidnapping incident with the police." His reflection on the event as not his fault and out of his control prompted him to proactively plan to take legal action. He explained how he "already has an attorney and they are suing" to address the instance in which he "resisted unlawful arrest." Dan's narration of the situation as an instance of resistance and fault on the part of the more powerful actors demonstrates his effort to craft an agentic narrative in relation to his experience of constraint.

Another example of a respondent who narrated both agency and passivity in response to a constraining situation was Molly, a biracial woman with less than a high school degree and a low household income. When asked about her financial situation, Molly voiced passivity, saying, "it's not the best. I mean I'm broke as hell." She continued responding to this question just after the segment ended: "I would like to improve it, it's just it's hard trying to get a job when you don't have a [degree], and you don't have reliable transportation, and you don't have much of a work experience." She noted her difficult financial situation and the structural obstacles standing in her way as she contemplated the possibility of a better life.

Nonetheless, when imagining how she would respond if her financial situation unexpectedly improved, Molly was able to plan and prioritize tasks in an agentic manner. She voiced agency when describing how she would organize the use of the money: "It depends on the urgency. If a bill needs to be paid or something like that, or if we needed food or whatever, that would be the main thing that I would think of first, either a bill or food-wise or if we just need your basic everyday stuff like soap or lotion, stuff like that . . . if that is taken care of, [I'd] see if the kid may need anything. After that, I would most likely just save it or use it for myself or keep it for myself." Despite her difficult financial situation and lack of education, Molly described herself as capable of handling such a situation with ease, prioritizing and making decisions about how the money should be used.

In other instances, respondents narrated intertwined moments of passivity and agency despite being in privileged positions associated with fewer experiences of constraint. Sarah, a White woman with a degree and a high household income, described her attempts to manage anxiety and depression exacerbated by disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a social worker for children, she found disruptions to her routines challenging and anxiety provoking. Anxiety at work affected her general well-being and emotions. In response to questions about her mental health she recounted, "I struggle with bursts of anxiety for sure. I definitely lean on the more anxious side of things . . . being kind of stuck in the same place brings on symptoms of depression just by the sheer fact of not being able to leave and experience new things."

Sarah described pandemic-related disruptions as contributing to her feeling a lack of control, predictability, or ability to plan or prepare for the immediate or long-term future. In her narrative, these experiences of passivity led to general feelings of depression and anxiety. In response to these emotional changes, Sarah also recounted her attempts to manage her depression and anxiety: "I'm proud of how I'm doing emotionally. I've made it a priority of myself over anything. . . . I guess going back to a routine, finding ways to incorporate some sense of normalcy or newness into your days is important. I would say I've struggled with bouts of both [anxiety and depression] . . . but I'll try to focus on managing it." Sarah narrated agency through her prioritization of mental health goals, her efforts to find routines to plan for and predict the immediate future, her attempts to restore a sense of normalcy, and her focus on managing her problems through deliberative and reflective action. She described how she was "not as worried as I was before" about work by the time subsequent waves of pandemic disruptions occurred. She suggested that her ability to anticipate responses to disruptions and her development of tools to manage them meant that "it wasn't as bad, you know, that is comforting. That shows that there's been improvement." Sarah's experience shows how people can narrate events as simultaneously producing experiences of passivity and agency. Furthermore, passive narratives provide opportunities for respondents to craft agentic narratives as they describe how they develop strategies and routines to overcome their challenges. Instances of resistance thus serve to increase respondents' sense of agency as they draw on those past experiences to confront subsequent obstacles.

Another example of a respondent who voiced both agency and passivity was Tom, a White man with a degree and a high household income. Despite being male and having financial and educational resources associated with expressions of increased choice and agency, Tom recounted his many run-ins with the Social Security system that presented challenges and constraints. He recounted his experience having to go to the Social Security office because he had received a lower amount than anticipated on a recent check: "Here's the hard thing about that. You have to go to the office, and you can wait half to three-quarters of a day before you get in to see someone to talk about your issue. Even then, part of the time, you can't get it settled, so you have to come back again or you have to wait on them or you have to provide more information. It's not the easiest process . . . I have to go see them and find out what has happened here, and I haven't had time." Tom narrated passivity as he described the many obstacles in his path to getting the help he needed ("the hard thing about that"). He described the length of time he would have to wait in the office to even communicate with someone. He explained the difficulty of the process, suggesting that he might be forced to return to the office more than once to get help. At the same time, he narrated agency as he described his determined and persistent actions to resolve the issue: "I have to go talk to them about [it]"; "I have to go see them."

Narrative Moves that Enable Agentic Moments in Constraining Situations

Beyond showing that the same respondents can narrate passive moments in some situations and agentic moments in others, as well as that they can narrate passive and agentic moments within the same situation, we also identify common narrative moves respondents use to position themselves as having agency despite the constraints they face, and that thus facilitate agentic moments. We focus on two kinds of moves: how respondents narrow or expand the focus of their narratives and how respondents highlight specific types of agency to facilitate agentic moments.

One narrative move that allowed respondents to claim a sense of agency in unexpected circumstances was shifting their focus to maintain a sense of control. Emily, a White woman with a degree and a high household income, described how she dealt with her mother's health challenges:

> her health is going downhill very quickly . . . and I'm here and I can't really do anything. I feel guilty that I'm not [there] and I can't help her, but I also feel [that] thank God I am [here], because if I was [there] I would have to help her with things constantly and it would probably be a very stressful situation for me. Being miles away is . . . good because I'm very separated from it. . . . I kind of just pretend it's not happening most of the time so it doesn't affect my day-to-day life or work or anything even though I feel like I should be worrying a lot more than I do.

Facing her mother's debilitating illness, Emily described little agency in addressing the course of the disease. Instead of only narrating passivity in response to a situation outside of her control ("I can't really do anything"), Emily was able to narrate an agentic moment by focusing on her everyday routines, work life, and immediate environment. She expressed an implicit choice to shift her focus to her day-to-day life rather than focusing on her inability to help her mother. In this instance, by reducing the spatial and interpersonal scale of her focus, Emily crafted a narrative of agency and control and was able to regulate stress and worry.

Contrastingly, Ashley, a Black woman whose household income was low, facilitated an agentic moment by shifting her narrative to expand her focus. She discussed her difficulty controlling her temper and quick emotional reactions, initially describing herself using passive language, as out of control: "I know I have a messed up attitude. I got a messed up temper. I go from zero to a hundred real quick." However, she continued:

> I try to just kind of stay to myself. I try to treat people how I want to be treated, talk to people how I want to be talked to. . . . I think I'm doing real good. Everybody get depressed, everybody living with different things that's going on in their lives and it makes them depressed. But I don't be depressed. . . . If I'm sad or if I'm going through anything nobody would ever known about it unless I opened my mouth and tell them because I carry it real well. I still smile. I still talk to people.

In contrast to Emily's shrinking her focus to retain a sense of control, Ashley expanded her focus beyond herself to narrate her emotional reactions as a deliberate choice. First, by acknowledging that "everybody living with different things," she compared her emotional state with that of other people in society, recognizing alternative challenges and ways of reacting. Then, by reflecting on how she wanted to be treated and thinking about how her behaviors and emotional responses affected others, she narrated her conscious and deliberate choices to control her emotions and self-presentation. In this instance, shifting to expand her focus led Ashley to identify multiple ways to react and narrate herself as an agent who consciously chose a specific self-presentation.

Another common narrative move was for respondents to draw on different ways of claiming agency that facilitated agentic moments in trying situations, particularly highlighting their ability to make difficult decisions or overcome obstacles. For instance, Pam, a Black woman with a degree and a low household income, faced chronic health struggles that were outside her control. Despite her very difficult health circumstances, Pam described herself as determinedly overcoming obstacles, making decisions, and maintaining her self-reliance to construct an agentic self-narrative. She described her strategies to treat her pain:

> I said, well, Lord, I just have to deal with some of this pain. I said as long as it's not to the point where it's excruciating, if it gets excruciating then I have to go somewhere, but it's just like annoying, very annoying, aching. At night it gets really, really terrible, but when I take that Tylenol PM . . . it helps me sleep. It kind of calms it down . . . but anything is manageable. I think you have to put your mind to anything. I don't worry about it. Back when [the doctor] did have me on those medicines I wouldn't take so much. I would probably take half a piece of the pill and I said well, Lord, if I can get through with that I can make it with this.

Although curing her pain remained outside her ability, Pam crafted an agentic moment by focusing on her ability to manage her health condition and relying on her own remedies over stronger medications or professional help. She learned many of these techniques, such as taking Tylenol at night, through her past experiences dealing with the challenge, which helped support her belief that she could continue to manage the pain and "get through," overcoming any obstacles that came her way. Additionally, she differentiated between "annoying" and "excruciating" pain, each of which required a different approach to management. By delineating strategies for managing these types of pain, she was able to narrate herself as an actor able to make decisions about how to address her health condition.

In a different context, Ben, a biracial man with no degree and a low income, discussed two complicated recent experiences, one where he "got in trouble" for protecting neighborhood children from the police, and another when his identity was stolen. Discussing the identity theft, Ben voiced a passive moment, saying that he had trouble finding a lawyer, and one had even hung up on him: "a lot of them have probably been a little hesitant because I'll be taking on the state at this point. . . . I haven't had the best of luck yet." He thus narrated his lack of options and difficulty moving forward. Nonetheless, he positioned himself as actively "working on it," saying, "I've got a couple ideas left." His focus on his determination to overcome obstacles allowed him to narrate himself as agentic despite his frustrating experiences. Moreover, despite his previous negative experiences with the police, he narrated an agentic moment in his most recent experience with them: "I ran into some nonsense with cops and stuff like that, but I usually just play my role, play it cool, and just ask real, like personal questions. I'm an asshole sometimes. I like to be sarcastic and stuff, if I feel bold." By demoting his experience with the cops as nonsense and foregrounding his performance in front of them, he similarly highlighted his ability to skillfully overcome obstacles to describe himself as agentic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine how people narrate agency—their ability to construct goals, make decisions, plan for the future, and develop pathways of action toward their objectives in their everyday lives as they face obstacles and constraints. By analyzing the American Voices Project data using computational methods, we show that respondents' narratives of agency at the level of the individual align with some research concluding that social disadvantage constrains agency, but that this level of analysis fails to reveal the variation in narrations of agency between the many situations an individual may encounter. By performing a qualitative analysis of interview segments, we find that respondents narrate agency in some situations and passivity in others, can narrate a single situation in a way that is simultaneously agentic and passive, and use several maneuvers to describe themselves as agentic, even in challenging situations. Based on this analysis, we develop the concept of agentic moments, highlighting individuals' capacity to narrate agency in constraining situations. Agentic moments result from narrative moves individuals employ to support narratives of agentic selfhood. Thus we argue that people's narratives of agency often co-occur with narrative passivity and are variable and situationally dependent. We build on research to propose a cultural and contextual model of agency that captures how people are able to narrate an agentic self, regardless of their levels of privilege or the constraints they encounter.

Our analysis contributes to research on agency by proposing agentic moments as a narrative and situational concept that illuminates how people craft agentic narratives, including in challenging contexts. The concept of agentic moments captures the co-occurrence of agency and passivity, and the ways in which people can narrate both. As we empirically demonstrate, agency and passivity often interact—experiences of hardship create openings for agentic moments. People narrate agentic pasts to achieve ideals of an agentic self despite challenges. Importantly, our mixed-methods analysis of a nationally representative interview-based dataset enables us to demonstrate that people across socioeconomic strata, ethnoracial categories, and other social dimensions craft agentic moments to narrate themselves as the protagonists of their lives in a multitude of different contexts. We thus extend the research tradition demonstrating that people, including people in disadvantaged positions, draw on cultural tools to present themselves as agentic and thus craft a socially worthy identity for themselves (Anderson 1999; Lamont 2019; Edin and Schaefer 2015), particularly in a highly individualistic American society (Lamont 2019; Markus and Kitayama 2003; Markus 2017). Future scholarship should continue to examine the meanings and manifestations of agency to explain how individuals narrate and understand their abilities to overcome challenges (Markus and Kitayama 2003). Research could develop explanations for why and under what circumstances participants blend high- and low-agency narrations, including by examining how cross-national cultural repertoires of the worthy self may influence people's narrations in different national contexts, or analyze how agentic moments manifest across different spheres of life (that is, in relation to work, family, health), scales, or temporal horizons. Further, future research is necessary to unpack concepts, experiences, and narratives of passivity, including how and why individuals may narrate passive moments.

Relatedly, we identify narrative moves as strategies that people deploy to craft agentic moments and which illuminate how people can construct agentic selfhood through narration. We show that individuals can shift their focus within their narratives, expanding or restricting their scope, to maintain a sense of control. For example, people may narrate more agency by focusing on the here-and-now rather than on personal challenges that seem intractable, like chronic health issues, or broader challenges, like climate change. Thus, along with temporal frames (Mische 2009), perceptions of scale play a role in how people work to position themselves as agentic. Additionally, we show that people can narrate agency by focusing on different ways of claiming agency, including overcoming challenges, making decisions, and espousing self-reliance. Future research is necessary to identify additional narrative moves and investigate how narrative moves are patterned. Furthermore, scholars should explore more deeply the multiple ways that people conceive of agency, including by developing a typology of agency.

Last, we contribute to mixed-methods research in showing the benefits of combining computational text analysis and qualitative analysis of interviews to explore large-scale datasets. Powerful computational methods allowed for a breadth of focus and attention to detail that would otherwise be impossible or invisible to a human reader (Voyer et al. 2022). Meanwhile, qualitative methods allowed verification of computational findings and interpretive analysis of the specific ways in which narratives of agency and passivity manifest. Nonetheless, we primarily drew on methods used to study published texts, like books, lyrics, or internet pages. Future research should continue to develop strategies specifically designed to analyze large-scale interview transcript datasets such as the American Voices Project.

Our use of interview data and focus on narratives allow us to reveal how people describe their abilities to affect their environments and overcome challenges. Given these data, we cannot draw conclusions about how people enact agency in interaction with others or tangibly affect their environments. Additionally, we recognize that interview settings may encourage respondents to talk about their experiences using more agentic language as they are asked to reflect on their lives and share their perspectives (Tavory 2020). Nonetheless, narratives structure how people understand their past, present, and future actions, and inform how they conceive of their sense of self and capabilities. Developing a complex understanding of agency is critical to elucidating the relationship between structural constraints and cultural narratives of the self.

Our research dovetails with the work of others in this double issue that speak to the complexity of agency by considering the interplay between subjective understandings and social forces (Rocha Beardall, Mueller, and Cheng 2024; Cramer, Youngling, and Rooker 2024; Sauder, Shi, and Lynn 2024, this issue). Other work in this double issue shows the utility of the concept of agentic moments indirectly by identifying narratives in which individuals make choices, formulate plans, and express judgments (Abramson et al. 2024, this issue; Chu and Lee 2024, this issue; Hiebert, Kahris, and Seefeldt 2024, this issue; Jackson 2024). In concert with these articles, we leverage the breadth and depth of the AVP data to illuminate the experiences of the American people, focusing on their narrations of agency as they navigate the challenges they encounter and pursue the futures they desire.

Table A.1. Antonym Pair Word List Used in CMD Model

Agentic Word	Passive Word	Agentic Word	Passive Word
plan	unplanned	active	passive
decide	undecided	persistent	resigned
decisive	indecisive	capable	incapable
control	helpless	assertive	submissive
determined	uncertain	powerful	powerless
goal	aimless	choose	abstain
motivate	unmotivated	prepare	unprepared
motivate	discourage	intentional	unintentional
agency	passive	focused	unfocused
purpose	purposeless	hustle	lazy
proactive	reactive		

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Table A.2. Covariate Variables

Label	AVP Variable
Earnings	total_income_ly
Education	Q8_highest_degree_simple_1 Recoded as college/non-college binary
Father's education	Q14_education_dad_parent Recoded as college/non-college binary
White	Q6_race_ethnicity_1 Recoded as White/nonwhite binary
Man	Q7_gender_simple_1 Recoded as man/woman binary
Age	Q3_age_1

Source: Authors' tabulation.

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How Americans Judge: A Topology of Moral Communities

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Despite research on differences in moral logics across demographic categories, the overall community structure in how Americans share standards of judgment, and hence a fundamental basis for categorical inequalities, remains unclear. To identify communities of shared moral logics, we inductively code judgments in interview transcripts from a probability sample of Americans. We then identify clusters in a network induced by similarities in how Americans judge. We find that competence and prosociality emerge as primary logics by which Americans judge others positively. Gender is the strongest predictor for which moral logics Americans deploy in daily life. Finally, different communities emerge in judgments of institutions, or in negative judgments, suggesting that Americans deploy various moral logics depending on context, which suggests possibilities for bridging categorical divides.

Keywords: moral logics, judgment, praise and denigration, networks

How people judge helps define group boundaries. People who express judgment using shared moral standards are often perceived as belonging to the same group (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnár 2002). In this sense, shared standards by which people express judgment toward others, what we call moral logics, contribute to and maintain boundaries and categories (Massey 2007; Sayer 2005; Valentino and Vaisey 2022). In turn, these categorical distinctions can justify unequal distributions of social rewards (Tilly 1998; Tomaskoveic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019) or shape who organizes together to challenge existing distributions of social rewards (Lipset and Marks 2001).

Motivated by the salience of patterns of shared moral judgment in producing categories, a rich, interdisciplinary line of research has documented how demographic groups in the United States are characterized by distinctive moral logics (Lamont 2000; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lousbury 2012; Finkel et al. 2020; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Feinberg and Willer 2019; Fiske 2018; Fiske et al. 2002; Koch et al. 2016). These studies reveal that demographic groups demonstrate distinct ways of expressing judgment (or being judged), but in terms of understanding shared systems of moral standards, they proceed analytically in reverse. Rather than beginning by mapping

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moral logics by how Americans cluster together in how they express judgment, and identifying whether these clusters cohere by race, gender, class, or politics, these studies begin with groups and ask whether distinctive moral logics divide them. Even though the assumption of salient groups is analytically appropriate for other purposes, it means that the overall community structure in how Americans share standards of judgment—and hence, a fundamental basis for categorical boundaries—remains obscure. Here we dispense with the presumption of existing groups, and instead inductively identify moral logics by shared patterns in how people judge others while narrating their lives. Rather than asking, for instance, whether the working class has a distinctive logic of judging or being judged, we ask: to what extent can we identify distinctive communities, within which people express judgment using the same moral standards? How well is membership predicted by race, gender, class, or politics?

We answer these questions by coding interview transcripts from the American Voices Project, an unprecedented set of thousands of narrative interviews among a probability sample of Americans. Each interview followed the same semi-structured protocol about respondents' lives, which facilitates comparison. We code each instance of judgment for who is being judged and by what standard. Then, drawing on tools of network analysis, we identify communities of Americans who share similar standards for praising or denigrating various others. We call this network a topology of everyday judgment because it reveals how Americans are located in terms of similarities in how they express judgment in their daily lives. Finally, we discern the extent to which membership in these communities is predicted by categories such as race, gender, poverty, and political identity.

Our study contributes proof of concept for a method that relies on a diverse sample of narratives to induce a topology of moral communities. This method addresses limitations registered in prior research on moral judgment. Although ethnographic research on moral judgment has revealed important insights, it has also been criticized for having selective samples (Bellah 2007, 190). By contrast, survey methods rely on diverse samples but lack the naturalism afforded by ethnographic research. Survey participants are typically invited to judge hypothetical situations, or to brainstorm and rate hypothetical individuals with varying social characteristics, such as immigrants, or the unemployed. This procedure can reveal differences in how individuals judge the same hypothetical situations, but whether individuals are similar in latent judgments of hypothetical situations is less relevant to the construction of perceived group boundaries than similarities in how they express judgment toward actual people and situations in their lives. Our study addresses both limitations through inductive coding of life narratives from a probability sample of Americans. From here, we can observe similarities in how individuals express judgment and investigate whether and how Americans cluster by distinctive moral logics.

Aside from this methodological contribution, the theoretical contributions of our findings are twofold. First, we find that Americans indeed demonstrate distinct logics in how they judge, but discrete clusters can only be observed when decomposed by who they are judging and by which valence. Rather than a single topology of how Americans judge, multiple topologies are in play. Consistent with pragmatic conceptualizations of culture (Swidler 1986), we suggest that if moral logics are an important driver of group boundaries, then the fact that individuals draw on various sets of moral logics, depending on context, offers new possibilities for bridging categorical divides. Our second finding is that gender is the strongest predictor of the various moral logics Americans deploy in daily life. Our work shows that differences in how we judge cohere closely with gender differences, which is consistent with the enduring inequalities observed through gender segregation in occupations, the division of labor within families, or how parenthood is evaluated (Schwartz and Rubel 2005; Ridgeway 2011; Goldin 2014). To be sure, our null results do not mean other kinds of demographic differences are irrelevant in all contexts. Yet the socialization processes and life experiences that drive differences in how Americans judge appear most distinct across the gender divide.

WHAT IS A MORAL LOGIC, AND HOW CAN ONE BE OBSERVED?

Following conventions of research on boundaries, valuation, and field theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Molnár 2002), we define judgment as classifications of alters as good or right, versus bad or wrong. Inherent in this definition is moral worth: to praise or valorize others is to venerate them for being good or right, and to denigrate others is to classify them as bad or wrong (Thai 2022). When expressed standards for what constitutes moral worth are coordinated and shared with others, we call this a moral logic (Lamont 2000). Critically, this definition concerns how people share in their expression of judgment, which is what we claim can be captured through inductive coding of narrative interviews. Where our definition focuses on moral logics as a shared vocabulary for expressing judgment, some scholars have a more expansive definition of moral logic, which encompasses intrapsychic and latent schemata that motivate moral decision-making (Vaisey 2009; D'Andrade 1995). Because individual schemata are not easily captured through semi-structured narrative interviews, our focus here is strictly about the structure of social relations, rather than intrapsychic features of individuals.

When understood as systems of shared vocabularies for expressing judgment, moral logics help to constitute symbolic boundaries that can crystallize inequalities by establishing group boundaries, as well as which group is more deserving of social rewards (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Bourdieu 2000; Tilly 1998). Those who express judgment using the same standards are perceived as belonging to the same group. For instance, the temperance movement was constituted when the erstwhile middle class—largely rural and Protestant, receding in numeric superiority—shared and coordinated in a moral logic of temperance. This logic is evinced in shared *philippics* against urbanites as immoral and inebriated (Gusfield 1986). Other examples of shared moral judgment as a way of boundary-making abound (Lamont 2000; Gast and Okamoto 2016). A key reason to care about moral logics, then, is that they help to produce categories and structural inequalities.

To identify moral logics, cultural sociologists often rely on archival or qualitative accounts. For instance, Robert Bellah and colleagues (2008) rely on interviews to identify regularities in how Americans evaluate others and themselves. A core argument is that the common moral vocabulary or first language of Americans is self-reliance and individualism (Bellah et al. 2008, 20). Jacqui Frost and Penny Edgell (2022) analyze data from forty-eight focus groups to identify what they call a logic of care. Michèle Lamont's (2000) ethnographic study of working-class men suggests that white participants share a moral logic of self-discipline, whereas black participants share a moral logic of care for others. More broadly, ethnographic studies in educational contexts reveal class differences in how people are socialized to express various standards of moral worth, whether in the case of parenting, or experiences in high school and college (Lareau 2011; Calarco 2014; Khan 2011; Jack 2019; Rivera 2016).

Another approach—taken primarily by psychologists—relies on quantitative patterns within responses to questionnaires that ask respondents to judge particular groups of people or situations. For instance, research on stereotype content identifies key axes of judgment that stereotypically apply to distinct groups in society. Seymour Rosenberg and colleagues (1968) asked respondents to categorize sixty-four personality traits in a way that traits in a category are likely to describe the same person. By analyzing shared patterns, the authors conclude that two fundamental axes govern how people judge others. This basic approach has been extended across various research programs (Abele and Wojciszke 2007b; Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007), such as research suggesting that the axes are warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2002) or communal and agentic (Abele and Wojciszke 2007a). Recent contributions in this line of research ask survey participants to brainstorm various groups and how they differ, identifying empirical regularities from this data (Koch et al. 2016; Zou and Cheryan 2017; Lassetter, Hehman, and Neel 2021).

Both approaches have important strengths. Qualitative research offers unique depth and recognition of context, producing clear, and often emic, understandings of various logics that govern how people judge. Surveys to elucidate stereotype content explicitly ask diverse samples of respondents for their judgments about various groups, offering greater confidence that the results are general. A core analytic challenge that underlies both approaches, however, is that they begin with categorical groups and ask what distinguishes them in terms of how they express judgment (or are judged). If the goal is to observe moral logics, then the appropriate analysis should begin by identification of shared systems of moral standards before, rather than after, identification of how these logics differ across demographic categories. For instance, black and white working-class men may have different moral logics, but this finding does not reveal whether race or class are the primary fissures that divide how people judge, or perhaps gender or politics. Even with sufficiently diverse samples, as in the case of stereotype content research, the elicited judgments pertain to hypothetical groups of people (men, or women). Men are stereotypically judged for competence, and women for warmth, but this finding does not imply that people can be classified within two coherent systems of shared moral standards.

To address this analytic challenge, we draw inspiration from network operationalizations of culture (DiMaggio 2011; Goldberg 2011; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017). Specifically, we operationalize moral logics as clusters in networks induced by similarities in how everyday judgments are expressed. In network operationalizations of culture, the goal is not to understand the attitudes or attributes of any given individual, but the structure of relations or similarities among individuals. For instance, John Levi Martin (2002) argues that culture consists of unspoken rules that tie certain beliefs together, and that by observing the network structure of how individuals overlap in their beliefs, we can detect these latent rules in action (also see Mohr 1998). The example that liberals tend to drink lattes illustrates how ideological divisions can also drive polarization in lifestyle choices (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015). Here we adopt the same rationale as these studies: by observing clusters and other constraints in the network structure of how individuals overlap in their judgments, we see moral logics in action. To identify moral logics, the goal is not to understand how any given American judges, but rather to map the structure of similarities in how Americans express judgment in their lives. We call this a topology of everyday judgment.

Although we did not enter this research deductively, with preregistered hypotheses, prior work offers a rich set of starting intuitions that guided our analysis—both in terms of what network structures we would anticipate in a topology of everyday judgment, and the relevant demographic characteristics that are likely to demarcate people who judge in similar ways. One assumption common in research on stereotype content is symmetry, denoting that usage of a standard when judging positively implies usage of the same standard when judging negatively. At an individual level, this means that observing how someone judges positively is all that is needed to know what moral standard they use to judge negatively (or vice versa). Symmetry implies that the networks of similarities in how Americans judge will be structurally equivalent, whether people are judging positively, negatively, or when ignoring valence. That is, symmetry implies that by studying clusters in how Americans judge positively, we will know how they will cluster negatively, or how they will cluster if we ignore valences of how people judge.

A sociological intuition invoked in prior studies on moral logics, which is somewhat in tension with symmetry, is multiplicity. Pragmatic views of culture posit that, in settled times where power relations and categories are relatively static, moral logics are not shared value systems that govern action but rather a toolkit or set of resources by which individuals justify lines of action (Swidler 1986; also see DiMaggio 2002; Campbell 1998; Hechter et al. 1999; Kaufman 2004). In contrast to schemata that serve as the cognitive infrastructure for how people think or judge (Boutyline and Soter 2021; Vaisey 2009), logics as understood here are about making one's judgment legible to others: what Wright Mills (1940) calls a "vocabulary of motive" or what Robert Bellah and colleagues call a "moral vocabulary" (2008, 21). This linguistic analogy is useful in illustrating how a toolkit perspective implies the possibility of moral polyglots, where agents deploy moral logics in ways that are dependent on setting, just as people can speak different languages in different situations. The testable empirical trace of this theoretical claim is multiplicity, or the presence of various topologies of moral judgment, rather than one. Rather than judging all actors using the same shared standards, people may rely on different sets of moral logics for judging some actors, and not others.

In terms of the relevant demographic categories that we expect to predict membership in various moral logics, prior work sensitizes us to gender, race, class, and politics. For instance, Lamont's work leads us to expect white men to cluster in their judgments of self-reliance and diligence, but black men to form a distinct community of judgment that places greater value for prosociality and helping others (2000). Given research on cultural capital, we might expect class to predict adoption of distinct moral logics. Given stereotypical differences in how men and women are judged, we might expect gender as a strong predictor of which moral logics people adopt. As a reflection of rising political polarization (see Finkel et al. 2020; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), and the possibility of different moral foundations, we might also anticipate divisions by political identification. To be sure, there are numerous other potential cleavages. We could investigate the role of generational or religious (such as Christians versus non-Christians) categories in predicting how Americans judge. To keep our analysis tractable, however, we focus on key axes motivated clearly in prior work, saving additional possibilities for future work.

DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis relies on transcripts of interviews collected as part of the American Voices Project (AVP). Participants were selected using cluster random sampling of census tracts and block groups, with oversampling of households in the bottom half of the income distribution. Additional detail about the construction of the AVP sample is described in the introduction (see Edin et al. 2024, this issue), but for our purposes, the relevant features of this data are that the interviewees reflect a diverse probability sample of American households, and that interviews were conducted by trained interviewers through a consistent protocol. Interviews from this project were transcribed and made available for analysis on a secure server.

We recruited and trained three research assistants (RAs) to code these interviews for attributions of praise and denigration in NVivo. For each judgment, we asked RAs to identify whether the judgment was praise or denigration, who is being judged, by what standards, and a keyword in the interview that summarizes the judgment. By our definition, observations that are empirical and do not contain normative judgments are beyond the scope of our coding. Additionally, we further limited coding to praise and denigration originating from or directed to the interviewee.[1]

To ensure that the task was tractable for RAs, the authors produced a systematic coding scheme based on our own inductive coding until saturation ($N = 37$ interviews). This inductive coding of transcripts led us to derive thirty-six standards by which judgments were expressed—eighteen positive and eighteen negative. We later consolidated the standards that appeared fewer than five times across the coding of our RAs, with a final set of standards encompassing ten positive and twelve negative standards of judgment. General judgments wherein specific criteria could not be inferred from context were excluded from the analyses (such as "My mom is an amazing person" does not imply a clear standard of moral worth, unless the preceding section of the transcript described the mother's generosity).[2] For full

1. We originally wanted to include cases where the interviewee describes another individual judging a third party, but we concluded that these are second order judgments—perceptions about how others judge—that are analytically distinct from moral logics.

2. One concern is that removing these general judgments leads us to overstate the distinctiveness of how Americans judge. Hence we also conducted the same analyses with the generic judgments included as a robust-

transparency, we also include our original coding scheme in the online appendix.[3]

Similarly, we inductively identify alters being judged. Americans may not praise politicians using the same standards they use to praise their children. Hence, our original analytic strategy was to investigate different standards used to judge specific alters. Because of the limited frequency of the occurrence of certain alters, however, we do not report on results of such an analysis here. Instead, in the present manuscript, we have aggregated alters into two alter categories that are analytically distinct: individuals and institutional actors, who are being judged as representatives of institutions, such as the police, politicians, educators, health-care workers, and the like. Table A.1 presents a list of all alters coded in these two categories.

Because of funding limitations, we could not hand-code all 1,613 interview transcripts in the AVP corpus. Given resource constraints and absent ex ante hypotheses that would inform power analyses, we opted to randomly sample and code as many transcripts as possible, resulting in an analytic sample of 355 transcripts. A comparison of the demographic characteristics of the 355 randomly sampled interviewees, versus the broader sample of 1,613 interviewees, is reported in appendix C, which shows no statistically significant differences when multiple hypothesis corrections are included. The selected transcripts were hand coded by the authors and three research assistants, with several transcripts being coded by multiple coders to check for reliability. Details of the coding and validation process are discussed in appendix D.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Our analysis proceeds as follows. We first enumerate the frequency by which interviewees used various standards of judgments. Second, we construct a network where the nodes are interviewees, and the connections between these nodes (or edges) represent how much each interviewee pair overlaps in how they judge. To quantify overlap we calculate a Jaccard index for all pairs of interviewees, which represents the ratio of judgments with shared standards over the total number of judgments deployed across a pair of interviewees. This index ranges from zero (two respondents used completely different standards in their judgments) to one (two respondents used exactly the same standards in all their judgments).[4]

After producing a network of similarities in how Americans express judgment, we then apply community detection computational techniques (the Louvain algorithm) to identify clusters of shared standards, or moral logics (Traag, Walman, and van Eck 2019). This algorithm identifies clusters that maximize modularity, defined as the density of the weighted edges within clusters relative to weighted edges outside. In lay terms, the algorithm runs through various ways of grouping interviewees, each time checking to see how strong the connections are within the candidate group (that is, the degree to which people overlap in how they judge) versus outside the group. The algorithm continues through various groupings until it finds one in which similarities within groups are as strong as possible, relative to similarities with others outside the groups. We first apply this procedure to the full dataset of judgment, including both positive and negative valences and all alters being judged. We repeat this procedure for four subsets of judgments: praise about individuals, denigrations about individuals, praise about institutional actors, and denigrations about individuals.

Third, we characterize the various standards that constitute each emergent community. We

ness test. Whether generic positive and generic negative judgments are included, the results are substantively identical to our main findings except that there is an additional cluster characterized by generic judgments. See appendix A (https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/5/141/tab-supplemental).

3. See appendix B.

4. For example, if the judgments of interviewee A relied on standards of competence three times, safe one time, and sociable one time; and if the judgments of interviewee B relied on standards of competence four times and diligence two times, the Jaccard index of overlap between A and B is 0.636 ≈ (3 + 4) / (3 + 1 + 1 + 4 + 2).

use pairwise t-tests to detect whether the standards used in each community are different from those used outside the community. To aid in substantive interpretation, we use radar plots to indicate the prevalence of each standard, indicating the frequency by which a given standard is invoked, with asterisks to indicate statistical significance. We additionally label each community according to the standards that are most prevalent.

Fourth, we investigate how well demographic categories like race, gender, class, and politics predict membership in various moral communities. Because the dependent variable is an unordered category corresponding to membership in various communities, multinomial logistic regressions are used to predict the membership. As independent variables, we include the demographic categories of interest: self-identified race (black, white, Hispanic or Latino, Others),[5] gender (women or Others, men), poverty (having a household income under the poverty line following the Census Bureau, adjusted for household size, versus not being under the poverty line), and political identity (Democrat, Republican, independent, no preference or missing).[6] As covariates, we include age (eighteen to thirty-four, thirty-five to fifty-four, fifty-five or older, missing), educational level (no bachelor's degree or missing, bachelor's or higher degree), region (Midwest, Northeast, South, West), and coder fixed effects (to condition for cross-person variation in how coders approached the interviews).

Finally, to offer an overall assessment of which demographic category is most predictive of membership, we present analyses of how these demographics contribute to model fit. To identify which demographic categories best predict membership overall, we test how the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) changes when demographic categories are included in, versus left out of, the multinomial logistic model predicting membership in various moral logics. In a null model, we include only coder fixed-effects. We then compare the AIC from the null model with one where a single demographic category is included. Smaller AIC values denote better model fit. Hence, when we take the difference between the null model and a model where the demographic category is included, a larger difference indicates that the demographic category contributes more to model fit.

Throughout our analyses, we introduce various robustness checks as appropriate. For instance, we analyze whether our findings are sensitive to how we coded for standards. To do so, we repeat our analyses when pooling certain standards that could logically be considered subsets of other standards (for example, perhaps honesty is a subset of prosociality). Additionally, we use principal components analysis (PCA) to investigate the factor structure of the standards deployed in the judgments we coded, to check whether our coding could be aggregated further.

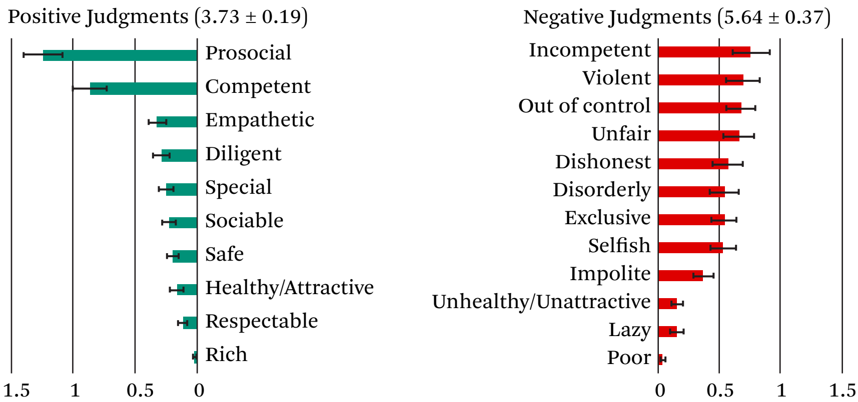
RESULTS

In this section, we report the results in the following order. First, we describe the frequency of various judgments in the data. Second, we demonstrate networks of shared standards in all judgments—both positive and negative—toward all alters. Third, we divide judgments by the alter category and valence to present four

5. Although we think those who identify as Asian are important, fewer than eleven interviewees identified as Asian in our sample of n = 355. Hence, for this analysis we group them under Others, not as an indication of theoretical disinterest, but as a reflection of pragmatic data limitations.

6. In gender and educational level variables, we originally coded other gender and missing education level as separate categories. However, only a few respondents belong to these groups, which raised the concern about disclosing their identities. Therefore, we put other gender and women together, and missing educational level and no bachelor's degree together. The assumption is that respondents in these small categories are more similar with respondents in the larger categories with which they have been grouped. When we refer in our subsequent analysis and discussion to a larger group of respondents (for example, women), such references also include any members of small groups (such as other gender) that have been combined with the larger group for disclosure avoidance purposes. The results are substantially the same regardless of how these categories are coded.

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics of Count of Judgments



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Numbers in the plot titles represent the mean ± standard error. The optimal way to view the figures in this article is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/5/141 to view the color versions.

networks of shared standards in judgments: praise about individuals, denigrations about individuals, praise about institutional actors, and denigrations about institutional actors. Along with each network topology, we also report the standards that different clusters in these networks deploy in their judgments. Finally, we describe the key demographic cleavages in these four networks.

Frequency of Various Judgments

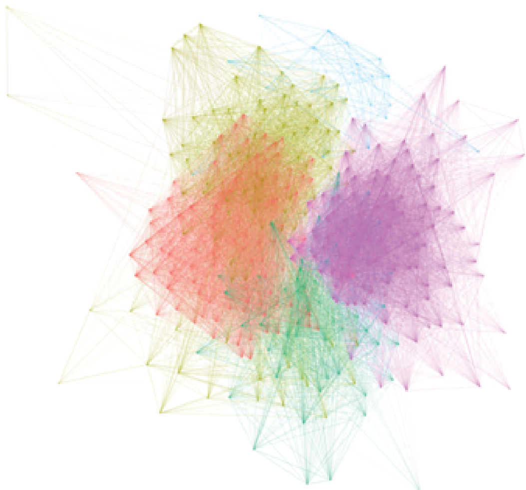
Figure 1 summarizes the frequency of praise and denigration, based on each standard. To illustrate what these standards capture, we also provide quotes and keywords associated with each in table A.2. On average, interviewees made more negative judgments (mean count = 5.64) than positive ones (mean count = 3.73). In praise, prosociality and competency were the two primary standards of judgments. Whereas praise involved two primary standards, the frequency of standards used in everyday denigration were more evenly distributed, as evidenced by the distribution of frequencies.[7] These descriptive results suggest that—in the aggregate—Americans are more diverse in their negative judgments (denigration), relying on a variety of different standards. By contrast, Americans are more specialized in matters of praise.

A Multiplicity of Topologies

How, if at all, do Americans cluster into communities regarding the standards they use to praise and denigrate others? As presented in figure 2, we do not detect clear communities in a network representing similarities in the standards people use to judge, including both positive and negative judgments, and both individuals and institutional actors. No clusters emerge from visual inspection, and, more important, our community detection algorithm cannot robustly identify groups. The maximum modularity of the algorithm is 0.119, about half that of other networks that will be presented in the following sections (which, on average, show a maximum modularity of 0.225). These results, of course, do not mean that no moral standards by which Americans judge others are shared. Perhaps a clearer community structure

7. We demonstrate the exact phrases or keywords for the judgments as word clouds in online appendix E. The results are consistent with the findings in figure 1. Keywords indicating prosociality (for example, support or help) or competence (for example, smart) emerge as the most frequent keywords for praise. In denigrations, keywords for being violent (for example, abusive, beat, or hit) unfair (unfair), out of control (for example, drugged, crazy), and disorderly (for example, racist) show up at the center.

Figure 2. Structure of Moral Communities Induced from Shared Standards of Judgments (Modularity = 0.119)



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Network ties are defined by shared judgments toward the same alter groups including both praise and denigration and both individual actors and institutional actors. Shading represents communities detected using the Louvain algorithm. Each node is an interviewee, and edges represent overlap in usage of standards of judgment. Thicker edges represent greater overlap. Edges across different clusters are not presented in the graph for clearer visualization of the clusters.

emerges when investigating how Americans judge individuals versus institutional actors, or by valence, suggesting that moral logics are present or salient only in specific contexts.

Figure 3 illustrates the communities identified in a network of shared standards of praise toward individuals. We include radar plots that indicate mean differences in the frequency of each standard between the members of a community and all other interviewees outside of the community. For instance, positive values indicate that the standard was more likely to be observed among members of the community than the sample average, with stars indicating statistically significant t-tests of differences in means between the community and other communities. Line width is proportional to the size of the community; the larger the community the thicker the line. Negative values indicate that the standard was less likely to be observed.[8]

Shared standards of praise about individuals (figure 3) are characterized by two main communities, with two peripheral communities. These clusters are clearly distinguished, with a modularity of 0.211. The largest ($N = 96$, upper right) community consists of interviewees who shared standards in praising individuals for competence. Interviewees belonging to the second largest ($N = 92$, upper left) community shared standards in praising individuals for being prosocial. The associated radar plot implies that members of these two communities were specialists—relying rarely on other standards. Indeed, those in the prosocial community were less likely to praise individuals as being competent.[9] On the periphery of this pair of core communities is a third community con-

8. Full results of these t-tests are reported in online appendix F.

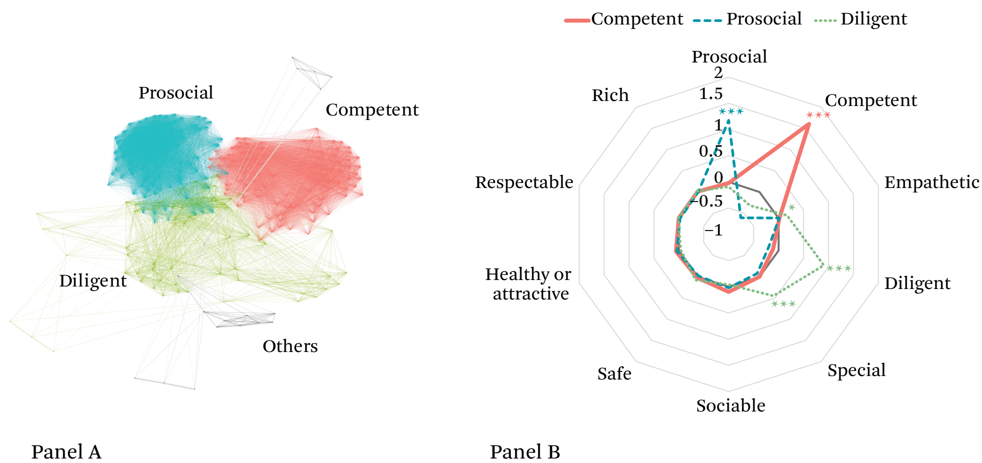
9. As an additional check, we use negative binomial regressions with coder fixed effects and demographic controls to test whether interviewees who praised individuals for prosociality were indeed less likely to praise for competence. We find this indeed to be the case (online appendix G).

sisting of individuals who did not judge for prosociality and competence, but instead on a more general set of standards, such as diligence, being special, and empathetic ($N = 64$, bottom). Our community detection algorithm also reports another small ($N = 18$) cluster that does not appear to use a clear set of standards. Another eighty-five interviewees were isolates, that is, did not overlap in their standards of judgments with others, or were not recorded as praising individuals.

Is the structure of denigration a mirror image of praise? In a word, no. Clear clusters also emerge in a topology of denigration (the modularity score as maximized by our community detection is 0.238), but the topology is asymmetric from praise. Whereas a network induced by similar standards for praise is characterized by two large communities, each of which has a specialized standard (competence or prosociality), the main communities in a topology of denigration are characterized by sharing across combinations of diverse standards. Figure 4 shows that the center of the network is a large community ($N = 60$, bottom center) characterized primarily by judgments of violence. (The radar plot indicates that other standards like being out of control, dishonest, or disorderly are also statistically significantly more likely to appear, as well.) The second largest community ($N = 54$, upper left) is primarily characterized by judgments of individuals who are out of control. Notably, people in this community eschewed judgments of violence, dishonesty, laziness, or disorderliness. Additionally, judgments of incompetence form a discrete community, but only at the periphery ($N = 32$, upper center), and those of selfishness are found in a larger, yet still peripheral community that includes judgments of impoliteness ($N = 53$, right side). Judgments about laziness do not appear as a discrete community and are infrequent. Hence we find little evidence of symmetry in the network structure of how people positively and negatively judge individuals.

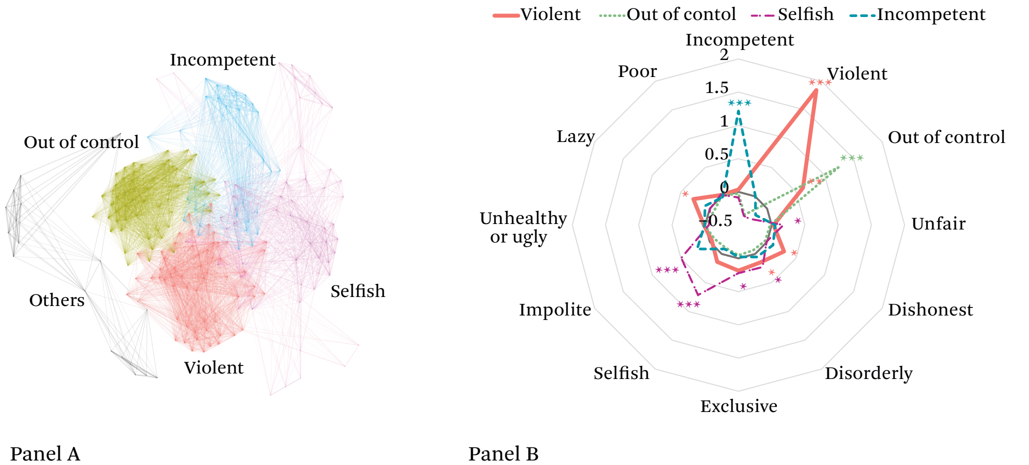
We next turn to how Americans praise institutional actors, such as police, educators, religious figures, and politicians. Figure 5 shows that the network structure of shared praise toward institutional actors is again clearly defined, with a maximum modularity score of

Figure 3. Structure of Moral Communities Induced from Shared Standards of Praise Toward Individuals (Modularity = 0.211)



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Edge width in the network is weighted by the jaccard index. Width of the lines in the radar plot is weighted by the size of each cluster. Edges across different clusters are not presented in the graph for clearer visualization of the clusters. Asterisks in the radar plot represents the statistical significance of the difference between the entire sample mean and the group mean.
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Figure 4. Structure of Moral Communities Induced from Shared Standards of Denigration Toward Individuals (Modularity = 0.238)



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Edge width in the network is weighted by the jaccard index. Width of the lines in the radar plot is weighted by the size of each cluster. Edges across different clusters are not presented in the graph for clearer visualization of the clusters. Asterisks in the radar plot represents the statistical significance of the difference between the entire sample mean and the group mean.
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

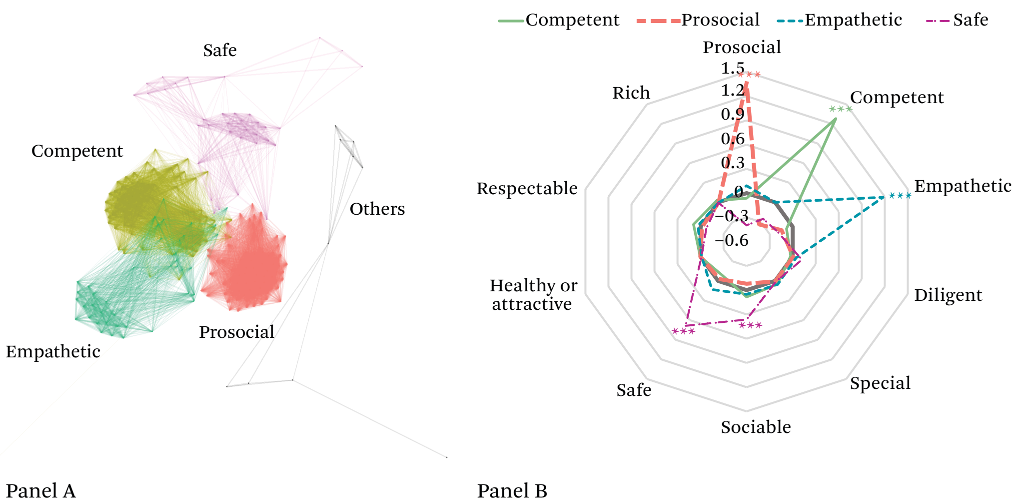
0.274. Although competence and prosociality also appear as large clusters, the network structure of how people praise institutional actors differs in two key ways. First is a cluster by which Americans specialize in judging institutional actors for empathy, or a willingness to tolerate and welcome individuals. For example, a respondent who had immigrated to the United States decades ago described their experience with medical professions: "At that hospital, both doctors and nurses, people who work on the front lines—since I had to get in through the emergency room—provided a great service, to be honest, they have my utmost respect, the profession they practice, even though I told them that I [didn't have medical insurance], they still did everything they could, because the person's health comes first."

Second is a smaller, secondary cluster of Americans who judge institutional actors for being safe, as when a white male respondent answered a question about police, "But the law enforcement I feel that they're there if I need them. I feel protected with them and they're like an insurance policy until you really need them that they don't exist, but when you need them, you need them. . . . With law enforcement I respect them and I know I'm protected by them."

The presence of these sizable, alternative, clusters means that the set of moral logics by which Americans judge institutional actors cannot be assumed to mirror how they judge individuals.

Finally, we show how Americans cluster in their denigration of institutional actors in figure 6. The modularity of this network is somewhat lower (0.175). Cross-linkages across communities are higher, reflecting perhaps the shared, public nature of critical discourse about institutions. To the extent that distinctive communities can be identified, the largest community (N = 77, bottom left) is characterized primarily by judgments of disorderliness, incompetence, and violence. The second largest community consists of judgments about dishonesty, especially about politicians (N = 66, left side). The topology of denigration is characterized by an even distribution of cluster

Figure 5. Structure of Moral Communities Induced from Shared Standards of Praise Toward Institutional Actors (Modularity = 0.274)

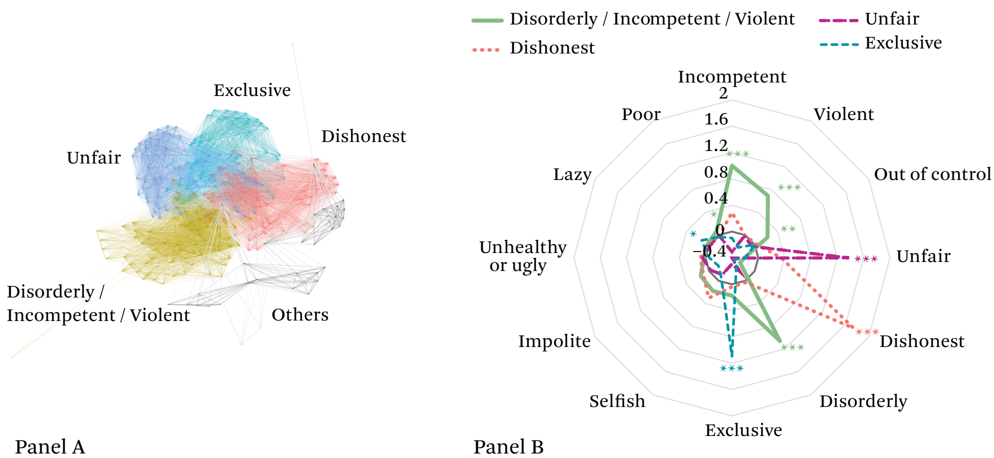


Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Edge width in the network is weighted by the jaccard index. Width of the lines in the radar plot is weighted by the size of each cluster. Edges across different clusters are not presented in the graph for clearer visualization of the clusters. Asterisks in the radar plot represents the statistical significance of the difference between the entire sample mean and the group mean.
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

sizes, and lower modularity, relative to a topology of praise. The structural difference likely reflects the wider range of moral repertoires Americans use when they denigrate institutional actors compared to when they praise others. For instance, largely overlapping with the foregoing two main communities are two other sizable communities: the unfair community ($N = 55$, upper right) and exclusive community ($N = 49$, upper side). Indeed, there are also two peripheral and smaller communities with fewer than twenty members. The presence of these communities again underscores asymmetry between praise and denigration: judgments of uncaring or unsupportive (selfish) institutions appear in one of the smallest communities ($N = 14$), whereas judgments of supportive and caring institutions appears in the largest, central community in matters of praise.

The general insight that emerges from investigation of these various topologies is that praise and denigration are not symmetric, and the way that Americans judge institutional actors is not identical with how they judge individuals. Rather than being mirror images, whereby judgments occur along axes that have positive and negative valence, the differences in topology imply that the moral logics Americans deploy differs between praise and denigration. As a robustness test, we address concerns that this lack of symmetry is an artifact of our coding. In online appendix H, table 2–5, we show how our results are robust even if we recode standards using a less granular scheme, as when we group diligence and competence, group lazy and incompetence, group empathetic, respectful, and prosocial, and group exclusive, impolite, and selfish. Additionally, in online appendix I, we show that our results are robust to further aggregation of how we coded for judgments. To do so, we conducted PCA to reduce the dimensionality of the twenty-two primary standards (ten positive and twelve negative) that we defined. The finding of asymmetry remains robust.

Figure 6. Structure of Moral Communities Induced from Shared Standards of Denigration Toward Institutional Actors (Modularity = 0.175)



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Edge width in the network is weighted by the jaccard index. Width of the lines in the radar plot is weighted by the size of each cluster. Edges across different clusters are not presented in the graph for clearer visualization of the clusters. Asterisks in the radar plot represents the statistical significance of the difference between the entire sample mean and the group mean.
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Describing Key Demographic Cleavages

Having inductively identified moral logics through communities in a network of similarities by how Americans judge, we now turn to the second part of our research question: what demographic categories best predict membership in these various moral logics? For each topology, we briefly describe the primary demographic distinctions, which are also the ones presented in figures 3 through 6. However, for transparency, we report full results from multinomial logistic regressions predicting membership in all communities as a function of demographics in online appendix J.

When it comes to the moral logics by which Americans praise individuals, our results broadly align intuitions from prior work. For instance, membership in different moral communities (or moral logics) is predicted by gender. Women are more likely to praise individuals for their prosociality than men: the predicted probability of women is 29.7 percent, and that of men 18.7 percent. This finding implies that the stereotypes applied toward certain groups of people are reflected in their judgments: women, who are stereotypically considered more prosocial, tend also to judge other individuals by the same standard. For instance, a white woman in her seventies said the following about her husband, reminiscing on when they were still young:

> He said, "Nobody should have to bury their parents alone." And he took off from work, to come with me, having just lost his mother, to come with me to bury my mom and, my step dad went to his family to be buried, and we're driving back and he still, you know, every couple of weeks he asks me to marry him but, you know, I could do worse than this guy. We really like each other, we get along well, we're good friends, and look how kind he is!

Here the respondent praised her husband for being kind and supportive, the very standards by which women are stereotypically judged for.

Democrats are about twice as likely as Republicans to adopt a moral logic of prosociality when it comes to praising individuals. This result affirms findings suggesting that political polarization in America has led to segregated moral communities, each with distinct moral foundations (Chen and Rohla 2018; Finkel et al. 2020).[10] Race is also a significant determinant of moral logics for praise. Those who identify as Latino or Hispanic are more likely to praise individuals primarily in terms of prosociality (predicted probability 31.9 percent) than those who identify as black (20.1 percent) or as white (25.4 percent). Conversely, they are less likely to judge for competence than those identifying as white or black (Latino or Hispanic 19.5 percent, white 29.7 percent, black 29.3 percent). We conjecture this finding may be attributable to immigration experiences, where individuals who identify as Latino or Hispanic rely on family networks, as opposed to institutional ones, for support. Despite research suggesting that lower income individuals value prosociality or behave more generously (Piff et al. 2010), we did not find that low-income individuals were more likely to appear in the prosocial community.

When we investigate the other topologies, only gender remains as a consistent divide that structures membership in various moral communities. When it comes to a topology of how Americans denigrate individuals, gender remains the main predictor of moral logics: women are more likely than men to denigrate individuals for being violent (women 19.0 percent, men 8.5 percent). The modal judgments in this community tended to involve frustrations about family or partners, usually male, being abusive and violent. A black female respondent describes her ex-husband at the time when they were going through divorce, "He was stalking me. He would sit outside in the parking lot and finally . . . Oh, and he was cutting my car off. He was doing all this crazy stuff because I told him I was going to divorce him."

Father figures are another frequently denigrated alter in this community. Another female respondent mentions how violent her father used to be: "He used to hit my mom and us too and I say, what my dad used to do to us I won't do that to my kids, I'm going to be the best mom for my kids, I don't want them to suffer like I did."

By contrast, men are more likely than women to belong to the second largest community, where "out of control" was the primary standard (men 23.3 percent, women 13.2 percent). The defining characteristic of this community is that the members denigrate other individuals for being out of control (such as addicts), but eschew other negative judgments. For example, a male respondent described his father in the following way: "My daddy raised us. When my daddy raised us, it was just really rough. My dad is an alcoholic, so we kind of grew up poor in poverty. I really don't want to say nothing bad, but truth be told, it was b—."

While recalling his mother, he added similar judgments about his mother and stepfather: "What can I say about this lady? She's a mess, really. My mom and my stepdad had met. My stepdad was on drugs. . . . We didn't have no structure or disciplines, kind of did what we wanted to do pretty much."

In terms of how Americans praise institutional actors, we find that gender again emerges as the most salient predictor. Women are significantly more likely than men to judge institutions primarily in terms of their prosociality (women 21.7 percent, men 14.7 percent), whereas men are more likely than women to judge institutions in terms of their competence (men 23.2 percent, women 15.9 percent).

Finally, when investigating demographic dividing lines in moral logics for how Americans denigrate institutional actors, gender is again the primary category that stratifies these communities. Men are more likely than women to denigrate institutional actors for being dishonest (men 26.8 percent, women 16.0 percent) and for being disorderly, incompetent, and violent (men 26.5 percent, women 21.6 percent). Here we also find important racial distinctions. Black participants were more likely to denigrate institutions for multiple features such as disorderliness, incompetence, and, as expected from the Black Lives Matter movement, vio-

10. Although, as we will see, political polarization is not salient in predicting moral logics in negative judgments, or in judgments of institutional actors.

lence. For instance, a black male interviewee criticized police officers for being racist and violent, concluding with the following statement: "For me honestly, people have been getting beat up and killed by the police all my life, so it's like nothing new to me, to me I'm numb to it, like I expect to be harrassed by the police, just because I'm black in America. . . . We've been knowing that police has been killing f—ing minorities forever."

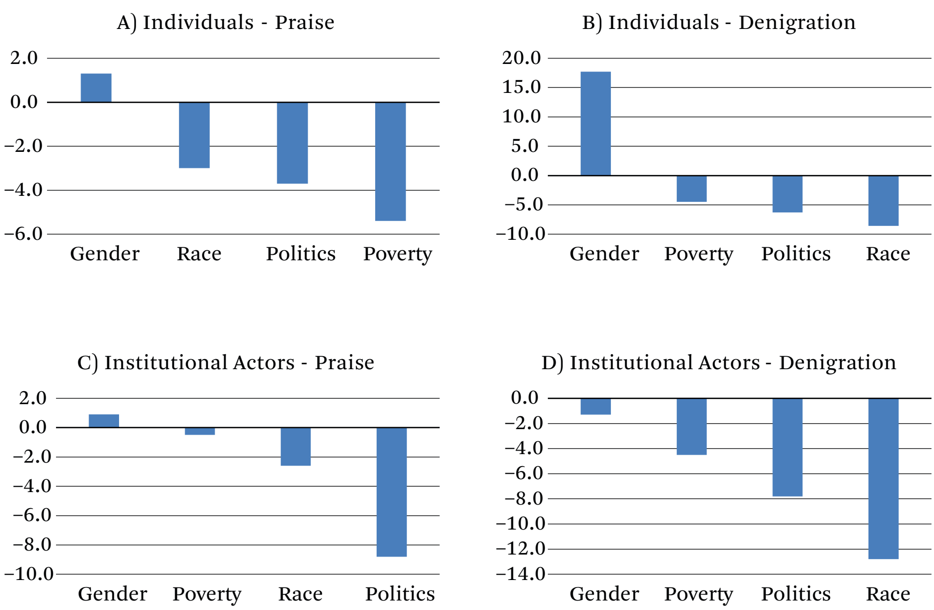
Other demographic fault lines, such as indicators of poverty or political identification, do not emerge as statistically significant predictors.

Gender Is the Strongest Overall Predictor of Moral Logics

To offer a more comprehensive analysis of which demographic category best predicts what moral logics people deploy, figure 7 presents the differences in model fit between a null model where only coder fixed effects are used in a multinomial logistic regression to predict membership of the moral cluster, and an otherwise equivalent model where we add a demographic variable—either race, gender, poverty, or political identification—to the null model. A key reason to rely on AIC results, relative to our earlier descriptive results, is that these analyze how well demographic categories predict membership across all communities simultaneously, rather than investigating descriptive differences within communities one at a time (such as using paired t-tests), which also increases concerns about false positive results.

Panels A through D indicate the difference in AIC between each model. As noted, if this difference is positive, then it indicates that the demographic category is predictive of membership in various moral logics. If the difference is negative, then it means the demographic category does not improve model fit, and the gender category does not predict sorting across moral logics. We repeat this analysis for all four networks: praise about individuals, denigrations about individuals, praise about institu-

Figure 7. Difference Between the AIC from Null Model and the AIC from Model with Each Demographic Variable Added



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Null models predict membership of clusters using only coder-fixed effects. The AICs from the null models are compared with models where each of the demographic variables is added to the coder-fixed effects.

tional actors, and denigrations about institutional actors, respectively.

Panel A demonstrates that gender is the only demographic category that improves model fit in praising individuals. When compared with our earlier descriptive results, the other categories no longer appear to improve model fit. Although the descriptive results suggest that they are salient in predicting membership in certain communities, these AIC results suggest they do not meaningfully predict membership across communities in general. Panel B again shows that gender is a predictor of membership in moral logics of how people denigrate individuals, and the other demographic categories again appear to contribute little to model fit. Panel C continues to indicate that gender improves model fit, whereas inclusion of the other categories does not. Panel D indicates, however, that all demographic categories fail to improve model fit, even if gender remains (relatively speaking) more salient than other demographic variables. We conjecture that this is due to the low modularity of communities in denigrations about institutional actors, meaning that the boundaries between communities are poorly defined in the first place, and hence demographic categories are less likely to predict membership in these communities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We inductively identified instances of praise or denigration in transcripts of life narratives from a random sample of Americans, as well the standards by which these moral judgments were expressed. By detecting communities of people who have the same standards in how they express judgment, we sought to identify coherent moral logics. We did not find clear moral logics when investigating overall similarities in how people judge. Instead, we detected communities only when we analyzed praise and denigration, as well as judgments of individuals versus institutional actors, separately. We found little evidence of symmetry. The results instead offer support for claims of multiplicity, where the moral logics that people deploy depend on specific circumstances, such as the valence of judgment, and who is being judged. Notably, the fact that clusters are discernible (that is, modularity is high in the community detection algorithm) only when decomposed by valence and alter means that no overarching structure links the various maps together.

We also compare the importance of various demographic factors in predicting moral logics. We showed that gender, rather than race, class, or political identification, best predicted membership across the moral logics inductively detected through shared judgment. Other demographic categories were relevant only in specific contexts. For instance, even conditioning on income, gender, race, and other demographic characteristics, identifying as a Democrat was the strongest predictor of membership in a community that judges individuals for prosociality. Negative judgments of institutions were structured primarily by race, especially identifying as black. Relative to other racial groups, black individuals were more likely to judge institutions as disorderly, incompetent, and violent.

Our findings offer important implications for two ongoing theoretical conversations. First, consistent with social psychological research on stereotype content, we found that people cluster in how they express positive judgments toward individuals, with most relying either on prosociality or competence, which was also reflected in our factor analysis. Yet we also found that the standards by which Americans expressed judgment had a different community structure when they were expressing positive or negative judgments, and when they were judging institutional actors or individuals. One avenue for stereotype content research to explore, then, is whether different judgments emerge when priming survey respondents to think about stereotypically positive and negative judgments separately. Another avenue to explore is stereotypical judgments of institutional actors—rather than demographic groups.

Second, to qualitative studies on moral logics, our results suggest the presence of multiple topologies. People rely on different sets of moral logics, depending on circumstances like who is being judged and by what valence. Like many other researchers, our interest in identifying moral logics was motivated by its salience in structuring categories. Moral logics are important sources of categorical distinction, such as when white working-class men express moral logics of self-discipline and categorize black working-class men, who are negatively judged as lacking self-discipline, as being different (Lamont 2000). Yet a finding of multiplicity is consistent with theories that liken moral logics to toolkits that people deploy, rather than schemata that dictate attitudes (Swidler 1986). People may primarily judge for competence or prosociality, but this is situational. When it comes to judgments of institutional actors, they may draw on alternative standards like empathy; when it comes to negative judgments, people draw on moral logics that are more complex mixtures of various moral standards. Multiplicity matters because it implies the possibility that cleavages can be cut. White and black working-class men may very well share moral logics when judging institutional actors such as their employers. Additionally, we were surprised to not find a moral logic cohering around standards associated with individuality, given strong claims about the first language of Americans being individuality. We conducted additional robustness tests to investigate whether these nonresults were simply because of irregularities in coding structure. Factor analysis, however, revealed that prosociality and competence are indeed still the primary factors.

To be clear, the absence of evidence is not definitive evidence of absence. Perhaps people do not judge for diligence and individuality unless they are explicitly asked to make moral judgments about others, which American Voices Project protocol did not do. Perhaps people are more likely to attempt to convey a consistent moral logic across various situations when explicitly asked about how they judge, but when making judgments without such prompts, people are more likely to demonstrate multiplicity. We would only be able to conclude that our findings definitively challenge prior work only after these (and other) possibilities are ruled out, but the surprising lack of findings warrants further research.

Finally, where we expected all demographic categories to emerge as important dividing lines for moral logics, we found gender functioned as a general dividing line and that the other categories were situational in their importance. These differences are likely attributable to enduring differences in socialization and life outcomes by gender (Risman 2004; Goldin 2014; England 2017). For instance, living with an abusive spouse conditions the judgments of many women to be about violence (indeed, domestic abuse was a recurring theme in the interview transcripts). These material differences in life experiences, as well as differences in socialization, shapes how people recount their lives and the standards by which they judge. Given prior work, we expected class to emerge as a strong predictor of moral logics. We conjecture that class might have emerged as a more general dividing line if our operationalization for class (falling below the poverty line) was more comprehensive. Because this operationalization is comparatively thin, it may explain why this demographic characteristic does not emerge as a strong predictor of moral logics. More generally, even though the magnitude of demographic differences discussed in our analyses are substantively significant (for example, women are more than twice as likely to be observed to judge individuals for violent behaviors), the assessment of demographic correlates within each community is likely to be underpowered.

Aside from helping address the above limitations in statistical precision and power, an expanded sample would enable study of finer-grained distinctions in standards people use to describe specific alters, such as differences in how pairs of alters are judged, such as between mothers versus fathers, those who are black versus white, or politicians in Democratic versus Republican parties. Additionally, we studied how these communities varied in terms of race, gender, income, and political identification—but these are hardly exhaustive. We encourage more deductive research that preregisters hypotheses about dimensions such as religious affiliation (for example, are self-identifying Christians more or less likely to judge, who do they judge, and upon what standards), age (we found that older Americans are more likely to judge, but do they differ in how?), region (are there distinctive modes of judgment unique to certain spatially segregated communities in America?), or occupation (does becoming a police officer imply spillover effects on how someone judges their family?).

These possibilities for further work underscore the methodological contribution of this work. Where qualitative research offers the appropriate level of thick description and understanding of individuals to identify moral logics, it lacks the scale of survey-based research to sample a population and identify how standards of judgment are shared more broadly. By contrast, by explicitly asking for judgments of groups, survey-based research lacks the naturalism and depth afforded by ethnographic or interview-based research. Using network representations of shared judgment through inductively coded interview transcripts of a diverse sample of Americans is a way to maintain some of the strengths of both approaches while reducing their respective weaknesses. Like other studies in this issue (Sauder, Shi, and Lynn 2024; Zilberstein et al. 2024), which have relied on this dataset to inductively identify various ways that Americans understand concepts like luck or agency, this article draws on the omnibus nature of a narrative interview to maintain greater analytic depth at scale. Here, our results reveal the promise of large-scale qualitative data collection, such as that in the American Voices Project, in elucidating a fundamental basis of distinctions and categories in American society. If how people express judgment makes and maintains boundaries, then the fact that Americans are segregated into distinctive moral communities implies a key process that makes material inequalities durable in the long durée. Yet, as our network analysis reveals, Americans also share multiple sets of moral logics that are drawn upon in varying situations. The moral repertoires of Americans are diverse and situational. Hence, even if group boundaries are produced from perceived differences in moral logics, these boundaries are malleable.

Table A.1. Summary of Coding Structure for Targets of Judgment (Alters)

Alter Group	Alters	Examples
Individuals	Parents	mother, father, stepmother, stepfather
	Children	daughter, son, stepdaughter, stepson
	Spouse	wife, husband, ex-wife, ex-husband
	other family	grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, in-laws, other relatives
	romantic relationship	boyfriend, fiancé, girlfriend, fiancée, ex-boyfriend, ex-girlfriend
	Acquaintances	friend, acquaintance
	people at work	coworker
Institutional actors	justice system	police officers, judges
	education system	teachers, educators
	religious system	religious leaders, pastors, god
	health-care system	doctors, nurses, medical system
	other social system	landlord, financial system
	political groups	Republicans, Democrats, specified political movement and ideology (such as BLM, Racism, LGBTQ)
	Neighborhood	neighborhood actors (such as HOA)
	demographic groups	by race, by gender, by sexuality, and so on
	people or society in general	

Source: Authors' codings.

Table A.2. Standards of Judgment, with Example Quotes

Variable (Common Keywords)	Mean ± S.E.	Example Quote
Number of total positive judgments	3.730 ± 0.186	
Prosocial (caring, generous, supportive)	1.245 ± 0.080	I got good people, I got good neighbors around me. We watch and we look out and support each other
Competent (skilled, talented, smart, strong)	0.868 ± 0.070	She's also very smart, she has always had a 4.0 GPA. Always been I would say brought up for classes, grade wise always has been talented in academics
Empathetic (welcoming, tolerant)	0.321 ± 0.036	The police were wonderful, extremely empathetic and they told me what to do, and they told me to get cameras and take pictures
Diligent (responsible, hard-working)	0.290 ± 0.034	Because my parents were hard working. They started their lives and careers, particularly in this country later than most do, and are definitely both by the bootstraps up people and come from humble origins.
Special (creative, inspired, fun, cool)	0.251 ± 0.030	But my mom, I look up to her a lot. Because she just has, she's always been really guided by what inspires her and what she wants to do in life. So especially since me and my sister moved out of the house like after she turned 50, she was having the best time of her life. . . . So, she's definitely an inspiration for me for sure.
Sociable (many friends, popular, well connected)	0.228 ± 0.028	He's amazing, he got a lot of friends, too many friends but got to love him, always got to have somebody around but not lately because of everything that's going on
Safe (protecting, tame, gentle)	0.197 ± 0.024	But the law enforcement I feel that they're there if I need them, I feel protected with them and they're like an insurance policy until you really need them that they don't exist, but when you need them, you need them. . . . With law enforcement I respect them and I know I'm protected by them
Healthy or physically attractive (beautiful, gorgeous, attractive)	0.166 ± 0.028	When I was working for that body shop in [PERSONAL NAME] is when I met this girl, just I think, at that point, I was already, you know, kind of feeling a little lonely and wanting something else in my life, and she was really beautiful
Respectable (polite, civil)	0.118 ± 0.019	I don't have a problem with law enforcement. I really like law enforcement. I welcome them into my life at any time, because [PERSONAL NAME] a very respectable person of law enforcement
Rich (wealthy, upscale)	0.020 ± 0.007	I've never really had a problem with the last president, President Trump. I mean, I figured since he was or is a billionaire what can it hurt.
Number of total negative judgments	5.637 ± 0.376	

(continued)

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Variable (Common Keywords)	Mean ± S.E.	Example Quote
Incompetent (idiot, weak, dumb)	0.758 ± 0.077	I ended up getting married to an idiot.
Violent (cruel, abusive)	0.690 ± 0.070	Hell, no, they trying to kill us, like erasing all the black people in the street, so that they know who is making things like they can't just go out and kill us, because they know we still got a system, a justice system here and that justice system still go, you still go to go through it, even if you don't right and get through it, you still got to go through it.
Out of control (unpredictable, unstable, reckless)	0.673 ± 0.060	But she has a substance problem. Not every day, but every once in a while. And she's unpredictable. You never know when that's coming. And so, I am doing everything that I have always . . . You know, supported her, always try to get her to address whatever issues she has, but she can be a problem from time to time. It is not drugs, to my knowledge anyway, it is alcohol.
Unfair (unjust, unfair, double standard)	0.656 ± 0.064	There are ways to get into the country legally, but during this time, if you don't have the resources to do that, illegally is the only way. I do understand that, too. But for a person to be afraid like, "Oh my goodness, if I get caught, then I'll be sent home," that's not fair. Let that person to get some kind of chance to explain it, "Hey, this is what's going on. I would like to get that chance to become a legal resident here, but I don't have the resources."
Dishonest (crooked, liar, shady)	0.566 ± 0.063	And then when she was [young], she got taken away by the state. The [INAUDIBLE] here is like really crooked. My daughter dropped a knife . . . and it was just a little pinprick, and hardly even bled at all, and because I didn't take her to the doctor, they said that it was neglect and they took her away . . . after that happened.
Disorderly (illegal, racist, nasty, improper)	0.538 ± 0.060	The president is such an abysmal human being. Okay. And how he would degrade President Obama and demean him say he's from Kenya and all that nonsense. How can you not become more left leaning when he's labeling these Hispanics are all rapists and murderers, come on already, but also to his horrible just horrendous history with women, and abusing women.
Exclusive (intolerant, judgmental)	0.535 ± 0.052	I remember reading something about the correlation with educational level and religion, and like it decreases -- and I can definitely see that because -- yeah, I did have a lot of problems with some of the teachings. Everybody always says, "That's not my church." I get it. [PERSONAL NAME] But overall, I can't agree with some of these practices. I just find some of them to be very exclusionary.

Table A.2. (*continued*)

Variable (Common Keywords)	Mean ± S.E.	Example Quote
Selfish (uncaring, greedy, unsupportive)	0.530 ± 0.053	You know, the doctors, all they are pill pushers, you know, they want to give you some kind of pill. You got one problem and they want to give you a pill that will cause us thirty or forty problems, so that way they can give you thirty or forty more pills for each one of that problems, and none of them fix it or make it go away. . . . They want to have you come back and do a dual office visit that's totally meaningless, except to pay their Mercedes Benz payment.
Impolite (spoiled, crude)	0.369 ± 0.042	I will say most of the customers, they tend to have a lot of attitude you know, as employees we can't. We can't, we have to be nice. But it's just those customers, if you let them know like let's say, why is your EDT machine not working. I'm like, "Well, I don't know. It's the system. It's our system." And they start yelling at you so I'm like, "Well, I just work here." So there's a lot of customers that are like that.
Unhealthy or physically unattractive (cross, ugly)	0.155 ± 0.024	I was gross back then I guess. In my eyes, I was gross. I wore baggy clothes, apparently, I hated showering.
Lazy (deadbeat, bum)	0.152 ± 0.028	He did like all the rest of the deadbeat dads do. They'll get a job and as soon as Child Support catch up with them, they quit the job and go get another job. He was doing that kind of stuff but he was also going to school.
Poor	0.039 ± 0.010	He also, was scraping pennies together. He was a server at [PERSONAL NAME], so he didn't even have forks. He didn't even have plates; paper towels, toilet paper, he just lived this incredible life of squalor. And, I was like, "Well, I have money. So, I can pay for this. I can get your house in order." I kind of like, strung him along for a little bit, and then it got too much to deal with.

Source: Authors' codings and calculations.

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Talk of Family: How Institutional Overlap Shapes Family-Related Discourse Across Social Class

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We develop a novel application of machine learning and apply it to the interview transcripts from the American Voices Project (N = 1,396), using discourse atom topic modeling to explore social class variation in the centrality of family in adults' lives. We take a two-phase approach, first analyzing transcripts at the person level and then at the line level. Our findings suggest that family, as represented by talk, is more central in the lives of those without a college degree than among the college educated. However, the degree of institutional overlap between family and other key institutions—health, work, religion, and criminal justice—does not vary by education. We interpret these findings in the context of debates about the deinstitutionalization of family in the contemporary United States. This demonstrates the value of a new method for analyzing qualitative interview data at scale. We address ways to expand the use of this method to shed light on educational disparities.

Keywords: family, social class, topic modeling, social institutions

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The family is a social institution that is central to most people's lives (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Seltzer 2019; Stack 1974; Swartz 2009). Family is responsible for the care and rearing of the next generation. Throughout life, family members are important sources of socioemotional and economic support, both routinely and in times of crisis. Whether out of altruism, obligation, or necessity, family members are "there" for one another in many ways.

Social class, however, conditions the forms and roles of families in Americans' lives, further increasing economic inequality. The deepest divide is between adults with and without a four-year college degree (Case and Deaton 2020). Adults with a college degree, for example, are more likely to marry and to stay married than those with less than a college degree (Smock and Schwartz 2020). They also have children later in life, on average, than those without a college degree (Guzzo and Hayford 2020). Also, given the still high degree of marital homogamy by education and the intergenerational transmission of resources, those with a college degree are likely to have more kin who similarly have college degrees and economic and social resources (Hirschl, Schwartz, and Boschetti 2023; Park, Wiemers, and Seltzer 2019).

Despite these structural differences, we do not know whether there are social class differences in how central family is in Americans' everyday lives, or how family as an institution overlaps with other institutions that shape individuals' lives. On the one hand, family may be more central in the lives of those who are not college educated. At least since the middle of the last century, ethnographic evidence suggests that working-class families have substantial social involvement with kin (Young and Willmott 1957; for a re-analysis of surviving data and a critique, see Lawrence 2016). Contemporary survey findings show that those who are economically disadvantaged spend more time with family members than those who are more advantaged (Bianchi and Vohs 2016). The greater proximity to kin contributes to the greater social involvement of the disadvantaged (Choi et al. 2020). The relatively weak social safety net in the United States also makes relying on family ties an essential way of getting by among the working class and poor (Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015; Stokes and Patterson 2020; Swartz 2009). Thus greater centrality of family among those without a college degree may reflect the degree to which family members must rely on one another for support, and greater institutional overlap with family life among this group may reflect greater complexity in these arrangements.

On the other hand, changes in family structure and function may have contributed to fewer class differences in the centrality of family in American's lives. Early theoretical debates about the overlap between family and other social institutions suggest that in Western industrial societies the family as an institution is separate from other social institutions, such as paid work and formal health care (Parsons 1943). This ideal type applied more to middle-class families than to working-class families in which wives and mothers were more likely to be employed and for whom family and other institutions had more overlap than middle-class families (Goode 1970). In the decades since these debates, both empirical evidence and a reconceptualization of the definitions of family (Furstenberg et al. 2020) have raised new questions about the extent of overlap between family and other social institutions and variation in overlap by social class. In particular, observations of the deinstitutionalization of marriage suggest a blurring of boundaries between family and the social institutions that organize other parts of social life (Cherlin 2004). These blurred boundaries and a context in which patterns of work are relatively more similar by gender now than in the past (Blau and Kahn 2017) may lead to similarities across social class in the extent to which family talk occurs in the context of talk about other institutions.

This article makes both substantive and methodological contributions. It shines new light on an important substantive concern: class differences in the centrality of family in adults' lives. Evidence on the centrality of family in individuals' lives typically comes from survey data or from in-depth interviews and ethnographies. The American Voices Project (AVP) combines survey and in-depth interview data for a large national probability sample (see Edin et al. 2024, this issue). Because the interviews are a larger corpus of qualitative data than would be available in other in-depth interview studies, the AVP provides a unique opportunity to apply a multistage, mixed-methods analysis of interview transcripts to describe class differences in individuals' family experiences and how these are influenced by the major social institutions that structure individuals' lives: health, work, religion, and criminal justice.

Methodologically, this article contributes by developing a novel application of a recently introduced topic modeling method, discourse atom topic modeling, or DATM (Arseniev-Koehler et al. 2022), to identify latent themes in the interview transcripts at scale. Topic modeling allows us to infer individuals' maps of the social world from the rich qualitative interviews (Carley 1994). Our approach complements recent efforts to combine qualitative and machine-learning methods (Abramson et al. 2024, this issue; Bjerre-Nielson and Glavind 2022; Zilberstein et al. 2024, this issue). Our application is distinctive in combining word embedding methods with topic modeling to allow inductive identification and characterization of broad themes (topics) that can also be attributed reliably to individual segments of talk.

To adapt DATM for application to interview data, we adopted an iterative approach that combined DATM with traditional regression methods. Our interpretations of the DATM results and the regression analyses are enriched by an interpretive reading of full transcripts and samples of lines within transcripts. Our analysis proceeded in two phases. First, we used an inductive approach to the interview data, applying DATM to identify seventy-five topics emerging from the individual interviews. We interpreted three topics as family topics, which we combined into an overall family talk measure. We evaluated the face validity of the DATM topics based on a qualitative reading of transcripts from interviews. We then regressed the degree of family talk that interviewees engaged in during their interviews on their social class as indicated by their education and additional control variables. Finally, we selected cases based on regression residuals for a deep reading of transcripts. This first phase of our process revealed social class differences in the degree of family talk and found that family talk emerged in contexts marked by institutional overlap (family and work or family and health, for example), family complexity, and fictive kin language.

In the second phase of the analysis, we expanded our use of DATM to evaluate the existence and co-occurrence of additional latent topics. For theoretical reasons, we focused on how institutions overlapped with family talk at the line level rather than at the transcript level; DATM allows us to assess institutional overlap at this fine grain, where it is most likely to represent genuine blurring or overlap. To do this, we used machine learning to map the semantic space of the corpus again and to calculate the cosine similarity of each line in each transcript to 200 fine-grained topics. We then assessed the line-by-line association between institution talk and family talk in a multilevel regression and tested whether this association varied by social class. We confirmed that family talk was associated with the institutions of health, work, religion, and criminal justice (that is, where family was a topic of discussion, these other institutions often were as well) but found no evidence of moderation by social class.

Finally, we selected random samples of lines for deeper reading to assess how overlap between family talk and discussion of other institutions arose, as well as whether and how these discussions varied by social class. Our findings revealed that overlap often occurs because individuals seek to flexibly manage their engagement in other institutions to support their families. Whether through earned income, health insurance, social capital, or other strategies, individuals deliberately engage in three institutional domains (work, health, and religion) for family management or gain. Family can also bear the brunt of negative outcomes from these institutional domains, as well as in the criminal justice domain. Both engaging in other institutions for family support or managing the fallout of negative institutional engagement were common themes across social class, although those with a college degree typically had more resources and standing to secure better outcomes.

The Centrality of Family in American Life

Although Americans are often depicted as culturally more oriented toward individualism than those in other countries (Fischer 2008), family is still a central organizing feature of their lives. Americans are born into and raised in families and maintain family connections throughout life. These family connections provide material support, emotional support, and social capital (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Swartz 2009). Yet how and to what extent family shows up in people's lives varies by social class (Gerstel 2011; Hardie 2022; Lareau 2011). Those in the working class and those who are poor tend to describe spending more time with extended kin relative to the middle class and report greater practical assistance and emotional support exchanged between family members.

Research has attributed class differences in family support largely to differences in need (Gerstel 2011; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2012). Poor and working-class families often rely on private support to stay afloat (Kalil and Ryan 2010, Mattingly et al. 2021), although those who have economic resources are more likely to give financial transfers than those who are disadvantaged (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013; Swartz 2009). Private financial support, however, is vital for poor and working-class families because public safety nets such as Medicaid and Food Stamps can be cumbersome to navigate and a poor fit for families' many needs (Danziger 2010; Paik 2021; Tach and Edin 2017). For middle-class and upper-middle-class families, family support helps maintain their class advantage through monetary gifts or loans, shared information, and connections to jobs (Collins 1998; Hamilton 2016). In some cases, simply knowing that family support is available if needed allows advantaged individuals to take more economic risks with bigger potential payoffs (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013).

Family life encompasses much more than the support family members give or need from each other. Family members spend time with each other in leisure activities, share meals that foster emotional closeness, and together develop ways of making sense of their world (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Cheal 1988; DeVault 1994). Class differences in these dimensions of family life may vary in part because of class differences in the opportunities and constraints imposed by other social institutions, such as the organization of work or paid employment and of health care. What individuals say about their family lives and how much they talk about their families provide insight into the importance of family in their daily lives.

Family and Other Institutions

An institution entails "a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity" (Turner 1997, 6). The family is an institution because it comprises multiple roles (spouse, mother, child, grandparent); norms (expectations of spousal romance, childrearing); and values (loyalty, heteronormativity) and because the family organizes patterns of human activity such as where and with whom individuals live and shared finances. The family, as an institution, also intersects with other institutions. Marriage is governed by the state and, for many, by religious institutions. Access to health care is organized in part by family ties and also by work, another institution that intersects with family by dint of time demands and financial remuneration.

Institutional overlap may not occur equally across social class, however. Prior work documents that poor, Black, and Hispanic families interact with the criminal justice system much more than middle-class, White, and Asian families (Johnson and Waldfogel 2002; Turney 2017; Turney and Wildeman 2013). Both work and unemployment structure family life differently by social class (Damaske 2011, 2021). Poor families also rely on some institutions to a greater degree for their survival, and this can lead to complex, multi-institutional involvement that can compound poverty (Paik 2021).

Although we know there are class differences in how families are enmeshed in other institutions, it is less clear whether connections between family and other social institutions affect the centrality of family in individuals' lives. We explore these connections and family centrality by focusing on four institutional domains: health, work, religion, and criminal justice. Each of these was chosen based on deep readings of the transcripts in our first research phase, although they are also theoretically relevant and reflect prior research. Access to health care, as noted, is linked to families through public policy. Personal health status is also linked to others in one's orbit and often managed by family members. Families manage leisure time around work, as we found in the transcripts, and sometimes family members work at the same locations. Religious institutions are organized around joint family involvement and often dictate normative aspects of family life (or try to). Finally, research has demonstrated that family members of those involved in the criminal justice system are deeply affected by that involvement themselves (Comfort et al. 2017; Turney 2017). Thus, these institutions are all theoretically enmeshed in family life. Our analyses identify the extent to which the institutions are combined with family talk.

Research Questions

We pursue three questions: Do individuals who are disadvantaged talk more (or in different ways) about family than individuals who are advantaged? How are talk about health, work, religion, and criminal justice and individual characteristics associated with family talk in interviews? Do social institutions structure family experience more for those who are disadvantaged (no college) than those who are advantaged (college)? Together, our findings point to the ways that family and other institutions are linked in individuals' lives and how these links may differ by social class.

Data and Methods

We use qualitative and quantitative data from the American Voices Project, a national probability sample of adult householders, to understand the context of family talk during a given interview. The AVP is an omnibus survey combining a large number of holistic open-ended questions with closed-ended questions for a probability sample of adults in U.S. households between 2019 and 2021 (N = 2,349 completed interviews, of which 1,613 had been transcribed at the time of this project). The data include an oversample of households in high-poverty census tracts. Field work was in-person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and then by telephone during the pandemic (American Voices Project 2021). The data are structured as interview transcripts and available under restricted conditions to protect individuals' confidentiality (see Edin et al. 2024). We use a sample of 1,396 interviews, excluding those that were not in English or when the transcription procedures prevented us from distinguishing between interviewers and interviewees.

We analyze the data in two phases. In phase one, we explore the data at scale by adapting a recently developed approach to natural language processing (DATM) to the analysis of interview transcript data, with transcripts as the unit of analysis. DATM allows us to extract high-level topics from the corpus of transcripts and to construct an interview-level measure of family talk; we investigate its predictors at the interview level via multivariable regression and use those quantitative results to select cases for a deep qualitative dive into transcripts. In phase two, based on what we learn methodologically and substantively from phase one, we refine our approach to focus on fine-grained topics at the utterance (line) level. In that analysis, we treat these utterances (lines) as the unit of analysis but take into account the multilevel structure of the data in which lines are embedded in transcripts. Both phases of the analysis rely on DATM for construction of outcome variables and some predictors.

Constructing the Outcome Variable: Family Talk

Phase one of the analysis estimates the amount of family talk based on the entire transcript of interviewee responses; in phase two, we use a finer-grained indicator of family talk by measuring it at the level of a specific utterance within a transcript. In other words, utterances (lines) are our units of analysis in phase two. To construct the outcome variables from the raw interview text, for both phases we use the discourse atom topic model. This approach allows us to construct measures of talk about other institutions (such as health or work) as well.

DATM has four steps. We outline them in depth because the method is novel; see

Arseniev-Koehler et al. (2022) for the underlying theory and methodological details. The key idea is that DATM converts a document, such as an interview transcript, from a series of words into a series of fine-grained topics. Those topics are learned from a representation of the language in a corpus called a word embedding. Our DATM analyses use lines from interviewers and interviewees to maximize the input data. The statistical analyses of education differences in family talk use only lines from interviewees.

Step 1: Constructing the Word Embedding

A word embedding assigns each word a position in a high dimensional space (sometimes called a semantic space); each word is therefore represented as a vector (a list of *D* numbers, where *D* is the dimensionality of the space). To construct a word embedding, we use a standard machine-learning algorithm called word2vec. Word2vec learns vector representations of words from the text data by performing one of two possible tasks: continuous-bag-of-words (CBOW) or skip gram (SG). For CBOW, the model predicts what a focal word will be, given a set of words around it, that is, its context. In practice, the model represents the context as the average of the corresponding word vectors; it identifies the word vector most similar to the average context (using cosine similarity) and predicts the corresponding word as focal. SG inverts this learning task, that is, predicting the context words from focal words.

Initially, word vectors are random and predictions are rarely correct. We train the model by converting the corpus into millions of these word prediction tasks; by gradually adjusting the word vectors to improve prediction performance, the model eventually learns a good embedding. In such an embedding, words that appear in similar company in the corpus tend to have similar word vectors.

The construction of word vectors involves several key choices. In both phases of analysis, we train word embeddings using a range of hyperparameters and then select the optimal model using standardized metrics for evaluating the quality of word embedding. Details on this step are in the appendix (see the section Training the Word Embedding).

Step 2: Discovering Topics in the Embedding Space

To discover topics in the embedding space, DATM uses an approach called sparse coding (Arora et al. 2018). Sparse coding assumes that every word vector in the embedding can be written down as a sparse linear combination of a few fundamental or atomic units of meaning, that is, our topics. For example, the word *ring* might refer to a treasured family heirloom, the squared circle of professional wrestling, or the sound of a bell summoning ranch hands to dinner. We thus might expect the word vector for ring to be well approximated by an atomic unit having to do with jewelry, one having to do with sports, and one having to do with sound. Each of these atomic units, in turn, corresponds to a position in the embedding space: an atom vector. In both phases, to construct this decomposition of the word embedding, we use an algorithm called K-SVD (for K-Singular Value Decomposition), which generalizes the familiar K-means algorithm for clustering. The main hyperparameter for K-SVD is the number of atomic units, or building blocks K, that is, discourse atom vectors, which represent our topics in the embedding space. We select a final value for K (following Arseniev-Koehler et al. [2022]), seeking to balance performance across three metrics of topic quality (see the appendix section Topic Model Quality Metrics). In our phase one model, we prioritized coherent and diverse topics over coverage of the semantic space; we also favored a smaller number of total topics for interpretability, selecting a solution with K = 75 topics. In phase two, we emphasized coverage while retaining topic coherence and diversity; after testing values of K between 75 and 250, we selected a solution with K = 200 topics, which balances performance across the three metrics.

Step 3: Interpreting and Labeling Topics

To interpret a particular atom vector, we look at the word vectors closest to it by cosine similarity. This approach is motivated by the generative model underlying DATM (Arora et al. 2016); the word vectors closest to an atom vector correspond to the words it is most likely to generate when viewed as a topic, that is, a probability distribution over words (for details, see the appendix section Interpreting Discourse Atom Vectors as Topics). In both phases, we identified the closest twenty-five words for each atom vector and their cosine similarities to the atom vector. On the basis of these most characteristic words, two of us labeled each topic with a low-level label indicating the specific content of the atom, such as psychological distress and, where applicable, a high-level label indicating broad topics like family, health, or work. We independently labeled the topics and resolved disagreement through discussion.

Step 4: Converting Interview Transcripts to Topic Sequences

Our approach to converting the transcripts to topic sequences is motivated by the generative models underlying DATM (Arora, Liang, and Ma 2017; for a full discussion, see Arseniev-Koehler et al. [2022]).[1] Inverting this generative model provides a recipe for taking each utterance and mapping it into a vector in the embedding space, that is, the region in the embedding space this utterance refers to, which Sanjeev Arora, Yingyu Liang, and Tengyu Ma (2017) call the local discourse vector. To compute this for each utterance, we first take the weighted average of the word vectors in each utterance; common words get lower weight and rare words get higher weight. Then we subtract the component that is common to all these utterance-vectors, which Arora, Liang, and Ma call the global discourse vector. The result now represents the utterance as a vector or position in the embedding space. This "utterance vector" can be compared with the word vectors and atom vectors in this space using cosine similarity (for details, see Arora, Liang, and Ma 2017; Arseniev-Koehler et al. 2022). Using this procedure, we take a given interview and compute a vector representation for every utterance.[2]

Outcome Variables for Phase 1 and Phase 2 from DATM Steps

In phase one of the analysis, for all utterances in a given interview, we find the atom vector (topic) closest to the corresponding utterance vector. Thus we convert each transcript from a sequence of utterances into a sequence of topics.[3] For example, an utterance reading, "I got married when I was twenty-two," would be converted to a family topic. Once a given interview is represented as a topic sequence, it is straightforward to construct our initial percent family talk outcome variable. For a given transcript (now in the format of a topic sequence), we compute the percentage of topics in that sequence that have the high-level code family. This variable is measured at the person level and becomes the outcome variable in our phase one regression model ($N = 1{,}396$).

In phase two of the analysis, we adjust our approach to capture the possible co-occurrence of topics within responses, as noted. Specifically, we compute the cosine similarity of each utterance vector to all possible atom vectors ($N = 200$ atom vectors).[4] This gives an estimate for how much each utterance in each transcript talks about each topic.[5] Our outcome variable

1. This model assumes that words in a sentence or utterance are selected based on both their raw frequency and on what is currently being talked about in the text, that is, the discourse vector; further, the discourse vector is a combination of a fixed global discourse vector and a variable local discourse vector.

2. We also exclude utterances with fewer than five tokens because estimating the underlying topic is often very noisy and ambiguous for very short utterances.

3. In essence, this representation treats each utterance as produced by a single topic—the topic that is the closest approximation of its utterance vector.

4. We do this rather than merely finding the atom vector closest to the corresponding utterance vector, as we did in phase one.

5. More technically, this calculates the projection of the utterance onto each atom vector. Natural language processing (NLP) researchers have long quantified the "connotations" of a particular word by projecting it onto other words or onto latent dimensions (like gender). Alina Arseniev-Koehler and colleagues (2022) extended this approach to topics, measuring and validating the gender connotations of various topics. If we imagine an utterance that talks almost exclusively about a single topic (say, family members), its utterance vector will be very

for phase two is each utterance's average cosine similarity to the ten topics with the high-level code family. We identified these ten topics by two of us coding them as family related. The family outcome was the average cosine similarity across all ten topics to each line (for a list of topics averaged to create the family outcome, see table A.1).[6] We labeled topics based on words with high cosine similarities and by reading the ten lines with the highest average cosine similarities for that topic. Here, our outcome variable and predictor variables based on topics are measured at the line level, using only interviewee lines ($N = 375{,}161$).

Predictors of Family Talk

In both phases, we use the survey data and additional context variables to build regression models predicting family talk. We focus on describing the variables used in the second phase of the analysis because we present those results in more detail. We describe additional variables used in phase one in the appendix section Phase One Regression Model.

Our models include measures of socioeconomic status, demographic characteristics, and other contextual variables from the survey as well as five topic modeling-associated variables. From the survey, we include gender (woman = 1, man = 0), race and ethnicity (Black, Latino, White, and other), college education (four-year college degree = 1 or not = 0), age, and nativity (U.S. born = 1, not U.S. born = 0). We also include whether the interviewee is cohabiting or married, household size, and whether any children are living in the household to account for factors that might increase family talk mechanistically because interviewers asked about other residents in the household. We include a measure of urbanicity (categorized as living in a rural, suburban, or urban area) and whether the interview was conducted remotely by telephone (1) or not (0). Measures of socioeconomic status in addition to college education are: respondent employment status (1 = employed, 0 = not employed), home ownership (1) or not (0), logged annual household income (added to 1), and whether the respondent received any means-tested benefits[7] or purchased health insurance through a marketplace (ACA) that provided subsidized premiums (1) or not (0).

We also include five measures assessed at the utterance (line) level. These include four measures of topics found in the transcripts, each of which is computed as the average cosine similarity of the line to each of a number of topics that all relate to the larger topic of health (12 topics), work (18 topics), religion (5 topics), and criminal justice (8 topics). For subtopics within each institutional category, see table A.1. In addition to these institutional measures, we include a measure of the number of words in each utterance.

Analytic Strategy

In phase one, we used a variation of a mixed-methods approach, systematic anomalous case analysis (Pearce 2002), designed to use qualitative data to elaborate on regression model findings. The idea behind this approach is that researchers can first estimate a statistical model of a relationship using survey data, then run diagnostics to identify small and large residuals (differences between expected and actual values), and finally sample these cases and use

close to the corresponding atom vector and more distant from others. If, by contrast, an utterance combines talk about family and finances, its utterance vector is likely to be somewhat close to the atom vectors for (some) topics in both high-level categories, and more distant to others. We can heuristically think of this as the amount of talk on a particular topic in the utterance; more literally, we can view it as capturing how much the utterance connotes each topic.

6. We computed Cronbach's alpha for each broad topic and tested alternatives to average cosine similarities in the model-building phase. Cronbach's alpha for our broad family measure was 0.92. For the other institutions it was similarly high: health = 0.89, work = 0.91, religion = 0.92, and criminal justice = 0.91. Alternative measures did not alter our findings.

7. Programs included: TANF, SNAP, housing vouchers, SSI, WIC, subsidized childcare, free or reduced-price lunch, Medicaid, CHIP, and public housing.

qualitative data to explain why they do or do not adhere to the model. To do this, we first regressed the percentage of family talk in transcripts on demographic and household measures, family support and closeness, and socioeconomic status. These independent variables were based on theoretical concerns and a close reading of twenty-seven randomly selected transcripts.[8] We then predicted family talk using the full model and produced residuals based on that model (r = actual family talk % minus predicted family talk %). Because our goal was to uncover potential explanations for the observed association between college education and family talk, we sampled forty-seven cases for which the models best predicted the outcome. We split these transcripts by gender and education ($N = 17$ transcripts among non-college-educated men, $N = 14$ among non-college-educated women, $N = 16$ for college-educated individuals).[9] Two of us read and coded these transcripts, looking for instances of family talk within transcripts and the contexts in which they emerged.[10] This qualitative analysis revealed three important conclusions regarding when family talk appeared in the context of interviews and motivated our analytic decisions in phase two.

We next turned our attention to a line-by-line analysis of transcripts to understand the differences in family talk by social class in more detail and by taking account of the co-occurrence of family and other institutions. With this new dataset—restructured transcripts to examine lines within individuals—we compared each family subtopic by social class to assess which subtopics were discussed more among those with a college degree and those without; combined family topics together using an average cosine similarity to each utterance and regressed them on the other institutional measures and individual characteristics; tested interactions between institutional predictors and college degree to assess potential moderation; and read subsamples of lines with medium and high levels of family talk and institutional talk.

All analyses in phase two accounted for oversampling and nonresponse by weighting descriptive statistics and the data in the multilevel models.

RESULTS

The primary goals of these analyses are to examine class differences in family talk and its institutional context and to develop a new application of DATM to enhance analyses of large samples of qualitative interviews. The results we report address the substantive questions about family talk and illustrate the iterative approach required for the methodological innovation.

Phase 1 Findings

Findings from the phase 1 regression showed that completing a college degree was significantly and negatively associated with how much individuals talked about family, net of the control variables. Our analysis of forty-seven sampled transcripts pointed to three contexts in which family talk emerged: family complexity and need, institutional overlap, and fictive kin language. We review these findings briefly.

Family Complexity and Need

Family talk often surrounded complex family relationships, such as the inclusion of step-parents, step-siblings, or step-children, ex-partners, and grandparents who played a parental role. To some extent, this family complexity may be mechanistically related to family

8. We initially sampled twenty cases, one of which was disqualified due to having more than one interviewee, stratified by gender and education and limited in age to those ages forty-five to sixty-four. We limited the age range to a group we expected would have the most obligations to and interactions with family. We added another eight cases later at the low and high ends of education to further confirm our initial impressions.

9. We first identified case IDs with residuals closest to 0 and selected the forty closest values. We then had to oversample low absolute value residual cases for college-educated men because we only had two transcripts that fit into this group at the first pass.

10. We also read transcripts for a small number of cases with large residuals, the content of which showed little discussion of family issues.

talk, in that having more family members to discuss increases the time spent on those family-related discussions. Yet complexity in family relations also demanded attention and time to navigate. Interviewees related experiences managing relationships with step-kin, exes, and other relations for which there was no standard expectation of norms and obligations.

Family complexity was also intertwined with family need; in part, this is simply due to larger families having more members who need assistance. However, family instability is also linked to poverty, both as a precursor and consequence. These multiple and overlapping complex family relationships increased the prominence of family talk among those who were not college educated.

Institutional Overlap

Family members' dual ties to institutions also appeared in the occurrence of family talk. Some respondents worked alongside their relatives, particularly spouses. Others volunteered or were otherwise involved in organizations in which family members worked or they lived in small towns in which interviewees shopped and ran errands in businesses in which family members worked. This institutional overlap was not limited to work. Health and access to health care were common themes in the interview transcripts, and they often overlapped with family talk when interviewees either helped family members who were injured or ill or were helped by them. We also found that discussions of religion and criminal justice involvement were related to family life. For religion, family members participated in religious organizations together. In addition, stories about criminal justice encounters often involved family members. This last finding was related to the interview structure, however, as the interviewers specifically asked participants about family members' interaction with police. Overall, our findings from reading the transcripts did not suggest that institutional overlap was driving class differences in frequency of family talk, but that the contexts in which institutional overlap occurred may be associated with social class.

Fictive Kin Language

Finally, some interviewees described friends and community members in ways that evoke a kind of fictive kin relationship. Although in some cases these were close family friends that were considered to be like family, in many cases they were not. For example, respondents sometimes reported on work colleagues being "like family." Some respondents also used family-related language in a negative manner or while simultaneously distancing themselves from the people they were describing. Thus, family language was used descriptively to compare or characterize other kinds of relationships.

Phase Two Findings

We designed the second phase of the analysis to more deeply examine class differences in family talk, how talk about other institutions overlapped with family talk, whether social class moderated the degree of overlap between family talk and talk about other institutions, and the context in which this overlap occurred. We focused on the theme of institutional overlap both because of its theoretical importance to the study of family and because the AVP study lent itself to this focus more readily than the other two emergent themes (family complexity and fictive kin language).

Descriptive Statistics

The first part of table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in our analyses at the individual level and at the line level. The final six measures are characteristics only of transcript lines. Once weighted, the sample is well balanced by gender. More than half self-identified as White, just over 10 percent as Black, and almost 17 percent as Hispanic or Latino. Nearly one-third had completed college. Respondents were between the ages of eighteen and ninety-four, averaging 47.6. A large majority (88.1 percent) were born in the United States and slightly more than half were living with a romantic partner. More than half were employed and additional analysis (not shown) suggested that the largest groups of unemployed persons were retired and disabled. About 29 percent of households included children under the age of eighteen; the average household size was 2.4 persons. Slightly fewer than half of the interviews were conducted remotely and 48.5 percent of those interviewed owned their own home. Average (nonlogged) household income was more than $51,000 per year. About 35 percent received at least one form of public support. Characteristics of individuals and of lines are very similar.

Family Subtopics by Social Class

Table 2 presents the mean values of each family subtopic by social class. At the line level, the zero-order association between the family talk subtopics and social class is minimal. Four subtopics did not differ at all by whether participants had a college degree (younger generation, formal transitions, family history, and children). Zero-order levels of family talk differed slightly by social class for other topics. College graduates spoke more about holidays, tracing lineage, and transition moments than those without a college degree. Those without a college degree spoke more about kinship, abuse and conflict, and older generations than those with a college degree.

Table 1. Weighted Descriptive Statistics

	Individual-Level Mean/% (*N* = 1,396)	SE	Line-Level Mean/% (*N* = 375,161)	SE
Woman	49.6%		49.5%	
Race and ethnicity				
Black	10.3%		9.6%	
Hispanic or Latino	16.7%		16.1%	
White	63.5%		64.2%	
Other	9.5%		10.2%	
College	31.1%		30.4%	
Age	47.6	0.95	48.6	0.91
US born	88.1%		88.5%	
Coupled	52.7%		54.8%	
Household size	2.4	0.07	2.5	0.09
Children <18 in household	29.4%		29.29%	
Urbanicity				
Rural	21.4%		23.8%	
Suburban	51.2%		51.2%	
Urban	27.0%		25.0%	
Interview remote	45.3%		41.8%	
Employed	56.3%		56.3%	
Income (logged)	7.6	0.24	7.6	0.28
Home owner	48.5%		50.1%	
Public support	35.4%		37.6%	
Characteristics of lines				
Family talk	—	—	0.27	0.95e-3
Health talk	—	—	0.26	0.83e-3
Work talk	—	—	0.24	1.02e-3
Religion talk	—	—	0.25	1.07e-3
Criminal justice talk	—	—	0.30	1.17e-3
# of words in an utterance	—	—	45.31	1.15

Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Variables defined in the text. Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 2. Cosine Similarity to Lines for Each Family Subtopic, by College Degree (*N* = 375,161)

Subtopic Label	No College	College	Top Twenty-Five Words
Holidays	0.20	0.21	Thanksgiving, christmas, easter, holiday, wedding, Halloween, weddings, dinners, celebrate, celebration, reunion, birthdays, celebrated, anniversary, birthday, 50th, cookout, get-togethers, presents, weekend, barbecue, cookouts, christmases, barbecues, celebrating
Kinship	0.33	0.32	Son, daughter, nephew, wife, grandson, husband, granddaughter, niece, girlfriend, sister, boyfriend, fiancé, brother, cousin, stepdaughter, sister-in-law, stepson, brother-in-law, daughters, sons, oldest, ex-husband, daughter-in-law, youngest, fiancée
Younger generation	0.31	0.31	Nephews, grandchildren, grandkids, kids, sisters, nieces, girls, boys, brothers, moms, siblings, sons, granddaughters, cousins, great-grandchildren, babies, aunts, dads, daughters, grandbabies, uncles, stepchildren, grandsons, wives, daddies
Formal transitions	0.33	0.33	Baptized, adopted, divorced, faithful, supported, happily, married, fought, committed, sexually, forgave, remarried, marriage, separated, divorce, virgin, raped, engaged, parental, acknowledged, welcomed, reconcile, wedlock, molested, marrying
Family history	0.23	0.23	Paternal, great-grandmother, grandfathers, great-grandfather, maternal, half-sister, aunties, step-sister, adored, grandmothers, dysfunctional, half-brother, dutch, disowned, pancreatic, adoptive, piedras, elder, grandmas, cajun, cerebral, Zacatecas, deceased, estranged, Brazilian
Abuse and conflict	0.18	0.17	Abusive, manipulative, jealous, violent, arguments, narcissistic, temper, sexually, disagreement, angry, volatile, cheated, confrontation, argument, outspoken, aggressive, fight, narcissist, unstable, aggravated, anger, verbally, arguing, altercation resentful
Tracing lineage	0.20	0.21	In-law, deceased, backbone, ours, great-grandmother, belongs, in-laws, grandparent, inherited, manages, remains, maintained, elder, inherit, supportive, paternal, stepchildren, separate, attached, aunts, theirs, grandfathers, father-in-law, dies, stepbrother
Children	0.24	0.24	One-year-old, four-year-old, 14-year-old, 15-year-old, six-year-old, two-year-old, three-year-old, seven-year-old, nine-year-old, girly, 12-year-old, 10-year-old, 19-year-old, eight-year-old, firstborn, toddler, 11-year-old, 13-year-old, oldest, baby, boy, spoiled, boys, littlest
Transition moments	0.32	0.33	Divorcing, settled, finalized, '85, separating, newly, eventually, settling, '84, '86, redoing, shortly, 2010, '98, 1992, moved, '93, finishing, '91, '94, '81, '82, remarried, '89, meanwhile
Older generation	0.38	0.37	Mother, grandmother, grandma, mom, dad, father, aunt, grandfather, grandpa, stepmom, stepmother, stepdad, grandparents, sister, daddy, stepfather, mum, godmother, mother-in-law, mama, uncle, parents, grandmothers, stepdad, paternal

Source: Authors' tabulation.
Note: Lines analyzed from 1,396 transcripts.

Family Talk and Institutions

Our topic modeling approach also revealed a great deal of institution-related talk, allowing us to test the proposition that institutional overlap drove family talk and that this might explain differences in family talk by social class. Table 3 presents the findings from the hierarchical linear regression analysis predicting family talk by line based on individual characteristics and the presence of other institutional talk within each line. Our modeling strategy accounts for how lines are grouped within individuals by including a random intercept at the individual level. In preliminary analyses, we tested the inclusion of a random coefficient for college degree but it was not warranted based on a likelihood ratio test. Overall, variability by line was considerably higher within individuals than across individuals, as indicated by the intraclass correlations. However, individual characteristics, including social class, still had statistically significant net associations with family talk at the line level, suggesting that some class differences were suppressed in the zero-order associations in table 2.

As table 3 makes clear, we found that social class and institutional talk were both signifi-

Table 3. Weighted Hierarchical Linear Models Predicting Average Line Cosine Similarity with Family Topic (*N* = 375,161)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Woman		0.004***	0.007***
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Race			
Black		−0.006**	−0.002
		(0.002)	(0.002)
Hispanic or Latino		0.000	0.003
		(0.002)	(0.001)
Other		-0.001	−0.001
		0.002	(0.002)
College		−0.004**	−0.003**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Health talk	0.098***		0.098***
	(0.006)		(0.006)
Work talk	0.058***		0.059***
	(0.008)		(0.008)
Religion talk	0.040***		0.040***
	(0.004)		(0.004)
Criminal justice talk	0.418***		0.418***
	(0.007)		(0.007)
Constant	0.089***	0.245***	0.086***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)
σ^2b	0.000	0.000	0.000
σ^2w	0.003	0.004	0.003
ICC	0.046	0.034	0.027

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Models 2 and 3 also control for age, U.S. born, cohabiting or married, household size, urbanicity, children in household, interview conducted remotely, employment, logged income, home owner, receiving public support, and number of words in utterance. Model 1 also controls for number of words in utterance. Lines analyzed from 1,396 interviews.

* *p* < .01; ** *p* < .001; *** *p* < .0001

cantly associated with family talk in models 1 and 2. When including both in model 3, the magnitude of the coefficient for a college degree declined slightly but remained negative and statistically significant. In contrast, the coefficients for institutional talk remained virtually the same. Institutional talk was significantly and positively associated with family talk. For example, in model 3, a one-unit increase in the average cosine similarity of health topics predicted an increase in the average cosine similarity of the family topic by 0.098. A one-unit increase in the average cosine similarity of work topics, religion topics, and criminal justice topics also predicted net increases of 0.059, 0.040, and 0.418 in family talk, respectively. We suspect that the criminal justice coefficient was larger than the coefficients for other institutions because of the way the interview was structured; respondents were specifically asked about their family members' experiences of arrest.

We next investigated whether the associations between other institutions and family talk were stronger for non-college-educated interviewees than for their college-educated counterparts. To do this, we interacted college with each institution variable (health, work, religion, and criminal justice). None of the interaction terms was statistically significant, suggesting that although social class and institutional talk were both independently associated with family talk, the degree to which the institution variables were associated with family talk did not vary by social class.

As a last step, we examined transcript lines to understand the contexts in which talk about family overlapped with talk about health, work, religion, and criminal justice. We also remained attentive to possible class differences in the content of these discussions. To do this, we randomly sampled twenty lines each at the low (<50th percentile), medium (between the 50th and 75th percentile), and high (>75th percentile) levels of family talk and each of the institutional variables, separately by college degree or no college degree. This means for each institution of health, work, religion, and criminal justice, we sample 360 lines (180 for non-college-educated interviewees and 180 for college-educated). We then read these lines for themes and meaning, seeking to understand how family talk arose within the context of other institutions and whether these contexts differed by social class. We examined both the sampled lines themselves and also returned to the transcripts to identify their broader contexts. Based on a preliminary reading of lines, we focused on those with medium or high average cosine similarity to our topics of interest. Those with low cosine similarity to family, for example, could be about any other topic and did not reveal any meaningful patterns within the data.

Family and Health

Utterances with above-median cosine similarities to both family and health topics typically touched on both topics very clearly. We noted three themes in the ways these topics arose within interviews: fallout from family members' medical conditions, substance abuse, and managing well-being among couples. These themes arose among both non-college-educated and college-educated interviewees.

Fallout from health problems often occurred in the context of multiple institutions. Patrice, a college-educated Black woman, for example, described how her family's health problem led to her decision to stop working. Further, when she was younger, she helped her grandparent take care of a relative with a serious illness. Patrice's career and educational trajectories were delayed by these and other family-related tragic events, but eventually she completed a graduate degree and had a thriving career. Anthony, a middle-aged Hispanic man also described his life being changed dramatically when his wife died in a car accident. As he described it, it was the most painful experience he ever had, and he went through therapy and years of mourning.

Another strong theme was substance use, which also sometimes intersected with other institutions. For example, Nicole, a low-income, non-college-educated young Hispanic woman, explained that her mother had legal problems because she refused to testify against someone who was accused of a drug crime. In other cases, participants described family members who overcame drug addiction. A non-college-educated young White man, for example, described how his sister's pregnancy led her to abstain from drugs: "I guess just getting pregnant kind of woke her up to reality somehow and she by some miracle was able to get clean." These discussions were not limited to those without a four-year college degree. Ellen, a young White woman with a college degree, for example, described that she "struggl[ed] on and off for years with addiction issues." The repercussions of such drug and alcohol use seemed less severe among the college-educated than the non-college-educated group, but this may be in part a difference between those who were able to complete their educations in addition to becoming drug-free relative to those who were not.

Finally, some interviewees discussed managing well-being along with their romantic partners. As Rosa, an elderly Hispanic woman without a college degree who had recently celebrated her fiftieth anniversary with her husband, remarked, "We [she and her husband] have our health. We are well, thank God." Nicole, a middle-aged Hispanic woman without a college degree, also said that now that her husband was over a recent illness "we're seeing the doctor regularly, so we're good right now." Other interviewees mentioned looking forward to years with their significant other, with the implicit expectation that both would be healthy.

Family and Work

We anticipated a clear association between work and family talk in the more nuanced analysis of text in the second phase. Although utterances with high cosine similarity on family and work are proximate in semantic space, the text did not always include both topics explicitly. There are, however, clear examples in which both work and family are discussed. Work was sometimes discussed as a means to support family. Ashton, a young, college-educated White man, for example, described saving money from his earnings "because one day I plan on buying a house and a car and supporting a family." Similarly, Anna, a young college-educated White woman, described staying "on top of the payments" and avoiding debt as her responsibility within her household.

Relatedly, many interviewees, both college-educated and non-college-educated, spoke about work and family in relation to money. Anh, for example, was an elderly immigrant who was not college educated but had managed, with her husband, to establish a middle-class life in the United States. She described how she had handled the household's finances by herself and that her husband "didn't know about money. . . . He was very surprised when I said I bought [a] house." When the couple was employed in their home country, Anh made more money than her husband, but in the United States he had worked for a large, profitable company and they had bought a house and raised children who were all thriving.

Finally, work was sometimes discussed in the context of giving to or receiving help from family members. Albert, a college-educated Hispanic man in his early sixties, told the interviewers that he and his wife worked hard to accrue savings to take their daughter on an international trip for her birthday. Troy, a non-college-educated Black man in his sixties described how his family "came up kind of hard. . . . So, we just came up, had to work, weren't no play times, we had to help my parents." In a very different context, Liana, a young White college-educated woman, described how her parents had "switched insurance providers to make it easier for me to see my doctors without us petitioning as much." Liana had a chronic health condition that required frequent doctor visits and multiple medications, making health insurance a critical resource, and she was able to manage this resource through her parents' work.

Family and Religion

Religion and family are perhaps an unsurprising overlap. Religious institution membership is rarely individual; families typically join a religious congregation as a unit and parents typically organize their children's religious (or nonreligious) upbringing. Suzanne, an elderly non-college-educated White woman, reported that her grandchildren did not go to Catholic school like she had: "But those kids didn't go to Catholic school. And I just figure it's their choice." Tabitha, however, a college-educated Hispanic woman in her late thirties, was deeply involved in her faith, going together with her husband and son to Bible study. Her daughter attended the church's youth group, and Tabitha reported, "She likes it though, because she was like, 'Are we going to church today?'" These decisions about religious service membership and involvement were family affairs.

Religion also played a practical role in individuals' lives, either as a source of solace or as a way to garner resources through access to a community. Carolyn, a White woman in her sixties without a college degree, explained that when her husband died, her children and grandchildren were very upset so she made a memorial to him: "We're getting over it. So that's why I keep his picture up there, and they say good morning to him. They tell him good night, and they pray." Tom, a White college-educated man, and his wife used church connections to adopt their children.

Family and Criminal Justice

Discussions around criminal justice were often about more than interactions with formal institutions. Family and criminal justice sometimes co-occurred in descriptions of family members as victims of crimes. Felix, a young non-college-educated Hispanic man, for example, talked about how he had felt shame when a camera given to him by his relatives was stolen from his car. To hide what happened before a family trip, he and his wife bought a new camera, despite the expense. Carl, a middle-aged Black man who had not completed college, described how his father was murdered when Carl was young: "Do you believe that? . . . But it, whatever man. . . . He got murdered." This was not Carl's, or his father's, first experience with crime. His father had been in and out of jail throughout his young life.

Some interviewees spoke about police encounters, often when prompted by interview questions. Alex, for example, was a middle-aged White man in a professional occupation. He described being embarrassed once when he was stopped for speeding and then taken in a police cruiser to a neighborhood where he was known. The next time he was caught speeding (as he told the interviewer, this was because he was late to work), Alex decided he would use his work position to avoid a ticket or more embarrassment, explaining that he said to himself, "'I got to try this [emphasize his work position to the police officer].' It actually worked." As he explained to the interviewer, he noticed that the police like (or perhaps respect) the uniform he was wearing.

DISCUSSION

This article explores the extent, patterning, and context of family talk by social class with a novel, nationally representative dataset of in-depth interview transcripts as both a corpus for a new application of a recently developed machine-learning approach and a set of meaning-making accounts. We make two important scholarly contributions with this work. First, our findings reveal important social class differences in the extent of family talk in transcripts overall and that family talk often occurs in the context of family complexity and need, institutional overlap, and fictive kin language (Lareau 2011; Paik 2021). Furthermore, we do not find evidence that institutional overlap occurs differently by social class, lending some evidence to theories of deinstitutionalization of family life. Second, our article represents a significant methodological advance in the application of machine-learning methods to interview data. Because DATM can learn focused, fine-grained, high-quality topics from a small corpus with specialized vocabulary—and connect these topics to small semantic units like interview responses—it is a promising tool for mixed-method research using interviews, combining the power of popular word embedding methods with the synoptic scope of topic modeling. The article demonstrates the extension of these methods to interviews and shows the detailed insight it provides at the utterance level.

A deep reading of transcripts in our preliminary analyses revealed that family talk occurs in the context of complex family relationships and need, institutional overlap, and the language of fictive kinship. Conversely, we may think of low levels of family talk as growing out of the ability to operate as an individual in family life—family relationships are more streamlined and require less attention, encounters with many institutions occur mostly on one's own, and family as a reference to a type of relationship is less salient. These findings point to the mechanisms by which family is central to some Americans' lives more than others. They also suggest a fruitful intersection between the analysis of individual agency (Zilberstein et al. 2024) and the prevalence of family talk.

Our next set of findings built on what we learned from phase one about differences between transcripts. By focusing on line-level data in this second phase, and mapping a more detailed picture of the semantic space, that is, one with more topics, these analyses offered us more analytic nuance. First, we confirmed net class-based differences in family talk overall, where family was more often a topic of lines for those with less than a college degree than those who had a college degree. Second, we tested the association of four institution-related topics (health, work, religion, and criminal justice) with family talk using hierarchical linear models to evaluate more rigorously our preliminary findings. We found confirmation that institutions are overlapping in individuals' lives, with talk of these four institutions and family closely associated with one another at the line level. We found no evidence, however, that the strength of the links between family talk and talk about other institutions varied by education. The similarity in institutional overlap between those with and without college degrees is consistent with the notion that family ties have become deinstitutionalized (Robbins, Dechter, and Kornrich 2022).

A close reading of transcript lines points to three conclusions. First, individuals manage their engagement in other institutions to support family life. This is notably true for work, where earnings and benefits can be employed to help family members, but also for religious institutions, which are sources of social capital, and health, where good health is seen as a resource or asset in families. Second, families manage the fallout resulting from disruptions from other institutions. This was particularly (but not exclusively) shown in health problems and encounters with criminal justice, where family members helped one another in times of hardship or mourned their losses. Third, although we did not systematically observe social class patterns, some individual stories illustrated the way privileges, such as signals about having a high-status job, allowed college-educated individuals to escape difficult situations or to manage fallout. Overall, we see how family members are a source of support for each other, helping each other with health problems and other needs. The persistent importance of family support suggests that some aspects of family life remain institutionalized (Cherlin 2020).

Our work also offers insight into the application of machine-learning methods, especially topic modeling, to interview transcript data. Other contributions to this issue (Abramson et al. 2024; Zilberstein et al. 2024) used similar machine learning methods—that is, word embeddings—as part of their analytic strategy. However, these papers used embeddings either to broaden the language used to operationalize a focal concept such as pain (Abramson et al. 2024) or to represent a concept such as agency (Zilberstein et al. 2024) and to measure similarity of interviews or segments to that concept. We use embeddings as part of a powerful new approach to topic modeling, allowing us to proceed more inductively and to discover a range of nuanced articulations of key institutions in the interviews. Discourse atom topic modeling allows us to represent topics and interview segments in a common semantic space and quantify the similarity of topics and segments. Although this is similar (at a high-level) to the concept mover's distance approach of Zilberstein and colleagues, DATM emerges from the theoretical machine-learning literature (Arora et al., 2016, 2018; Arora, Liang, and Ma 2017; Arseniev-Koehler et al. 2022) and is close to standard word embedding approaches, making the full machinery developed over the past decade applicable, such as methods for assessing robustness, as in Arseniev-Koehler and Foster (2022). Our topic modeling approach enabled fine-grained analysis of themes in the interview transcripts, even though the large size of the corpus inhibits thematic qualitative analysis of the full dataset using traditional methods. We emphasize, however, that although topic modeling guided our analyses, focused qualitative analyses were still crucial to unpacking nuances in our quantitative results; we share this close collaboration between computational and qualitative analysis with both Corey Abramson and colleagues (2024) and Shira Zilberstein and colleagues (2024).

To better answer our research questions, we also found we needed to revise how DATM assigns topics to the utterance data to explicitly consider co-occurrences between topics within utterances, an innovation in the second phase of our analysis. Our approach is more efficient than earlier approaches that assign single topics to a strip of text and then use sliding windows to account for potential co-appearance of topics within a larger unit (Arseniev-Koehler et al. 2022).

Although our results clearly indicate the promise of DATM as a method for analyzing interview data at scale, our experience working with the AVP data also suggested some ways that qualitative data like interviews could be prepared to make such analyses easier and more reliable. Standardized transcription practices would make such data more amenable to natural language-processing methods. These include uniform conventions for labeling interviewer, interviewee, and (where needed) translator and systematic approaches to masking personally identifying information (direct and indirect) that nonetheless allows stable reference. For example, when multiple personal names are used in a response, they should be differentiated and systematized across lines, ideally in ways that indicate familial relationships like the parent or child of the interviewee. Such up-front investments will make it vastly easier to apply machine-learning methods reliably while preserving confidentiality. This is an especially pressing need given the new National Institutes of Health policy on sharing qualitative data (DuBois et al. 2023), which will increase the availability of qualitative data and likely increase the application of computational methods to such data.

Our study has limitations. The AVP interview asks explicit questions about family and institutions, which may raise concerns that this drives our findings. More broadly, a challenge of applying topic modeling to interviewee data is how to account for the role that interview guides and interviewers play in the topics brought up by interviewees. Among our results, most vulnerable to this criticism are connections between family and occupational inheritance (an aspect of work) and between family and experiences with police (an aspect of criminal justice). However, most of the interview questions do not ask explicitly about the connections between family and institutions. Another limitation is that the AVP does not ask about most family members who live apart from the interviewee, and some questions ask about family and friends combined without distinguishing between the two. The AVP open-ended responses enrich the survey content on these family-related topics, and, with the DATM method, allow a deeper dive into the role these kin may play in individuals' lives even without direct interview questions.

Finally, family talk is, of course, a generalized indicator. Family talk may be both positive and negative. Particularly among families where need is high, family talk included both closeness and conflict. Thus we do not assume that family talk is synonymous with family closeness; findings from our phase one regression and qualitative analyses support this. Instead, family talk indicates a more or less intense presence of family as an institution and reference point in people's daily lives. In addition, family may be central even when people do not talk about it very much. To some extent, this measure represents the degree to which family is central as an acknowledged presence in individuals' lives. For instance, the college educated may not discuss their family very much but the resources they receive from kin and the safety net the family provides, even if it is not drawn on, are a major way families transmit advantages such as college degrees (Swartz 2009).

Our approach focuses on family and institutional connections as if they are in a steady state. Yet the AVP data were collected, in part, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family and institutional responses to this exogenous shock may affect the degree to which family members' institutional ties and the content of those ties vary by class. Although we control statistically for whether the interviews occurred after the start of the pandemic by using an indicator variable for whether they were conducted remotely, a fruitful line of inquiry would be to examine whether the pandemic altered talk about family and other institutions. As Max Besbris and his colleagues (2024) find, the pandemic—a health-related event—created housing shocks that some could alleviate through family support while others could not. Work by Catherine Thomas and her colleagues (2024) finds similar social class differences in the impact of the pandemic, particularly in the areas of home (family) life, work, and health.

Our approach and findings contribute to the literature on family and inequality using unique data and an innovative expansion of discourse atom topic modeling to examine how individuals' accounts reveal family involvement and how this involvement is patterned by social structure. Our findings point most prominently to the value of a multi-institutional approach to studying individuals' family lives and the factors that create and perpetuate disadvantage. They also offer clear methodological templates for further application of DATM to the type of rich interview data that projects such as the American Voices Project provide.

APPENDIX

The following sections offer additional details on how we conducted our DATM and regression analyses.

Training the Word Embedding

Before training the word embedding on the transcript data, we cleaned the data by tokenizing it and lowercasing all characters. We decided to retain selected punctuation in both phases of the analysis, after observing that it was used in informative and systematic ways; for example, we observed that ellipses appeared to indicate pauses or hesitation in the transcript. We also decided not to remove digits which we observed to be informative (for example, indicating ages, parts of abbreviations, or sums of money). Each utterance (line) in the transcript was considered a sentence to input into Word2Vec. For training the word embedding, we included lines from interviewers and interviewees; this is because, in general, more data lead to higher quality embeddings.

The main hyperparameters of the embedding are the training task (CBOW or SG), dimensionality of the semantic space D, and the size of the context window n (the number of words to either side of a target word that goes into its context). We trained embeddings with a standard, fixed dimensionality $D = 200$, for each of the four possible combinations of context window ($n = 5, 10$) and training task (CBOW or SG).[11] We then tested whether our model improved with reduced dimensionality ($D = 100$). Following standard practice, we chose our final model based on a standard metric of embedding quality: performance on WordSim-353 (which compares the model's judgments about word similarity to human raters). In phase one, the final word embedding model was trained using $D = 200$ and in phase 2, the model was trained using $D = 100$. In both phases 1 and 2, the final models were trained using the SG learning task,[12] and $n = 10$, and had Spearman correlations of 0.56 ($p < .0001$) and 0.56 ($p < .0001$) to human ratings, respectively. This is considered strong performance on such evaluations. In both phases, we also only learned word vectors for words occurring at least twenty-five times in the corpus to prevent learning low-quality word vectors, and set the number of epochs (that is, training iterations over the corpus) for the training algorithm at ten.

Topic Model Quality Metrics

Following Arseniev-Koehler et al. (2022), we use three topic model quality metrics to select the number of topics: topic coherence, topic diversity, and topic coverage. Topic coherence measures whether the most probable words for a particular topic are close to one another (in cosine similarity). Topic diversity measures the

11. As described in Arseniev-Koehler et al. (2022), CBOW is preferred for theoretical reasons, but in practice any word embedding works. Given the limited size of our corpus, and the fact that SG is thought to perform better on smaller corpora (relative to CBOW), we included both SG and CBOW in our hyperparameter search. When training the word embeddings in phases one and two, we indeed observed that models trained using SG outperformed those trained using CBOW on the WordSim353 test, for both possible context window sizes ($n = 5$ and $n = 10$).

12. The superior performance of SG is consistent with the general tendency of SG to outperform CBOW on smaller corpora, as discussed in the previous footnote.

text to which the most characteristic (probable) words for each topic are distinct and not overlapping. Coverage evaluates how well the sparse coding explains the full embedding space, using R^2 as a metric. In the first phase, after testing values of K between 7 and 800, we found that a solution with K = 75 topics balances coherent, diverse topics with good coverage. After working with the topics in the first phase, we decided to place higher relative value on coverage (which, in turn suggests a higher number of topics). Thus, in the second phase, after testing values of K between 75 and 250, we found that a solution with K = 200 topics prioritizes coverage while still providing coherent and diverse topics.

Interpreting Discourse Atom Vectors as Topics

Drawing on the theoretical machine-learning literature, we can use a simple generative model to characterize each discourse atom vector as a topic. The latent variable model of Arora et al. (2016) says that any position (discourse vector) in an embedding space corresponds to a topic model; the probability of producing a given word is higher when its word vector is more similar to the discourse vector. Since each discourse atom is a position in the embedding space, we simply look at the closest words to each atom (using the cosine similarity between atom vectors and word vectors) to characterize the atom.

Phase One Regression Model

In phase one, we built a regression model based on theory regarding social class differences in family life and expectations that family talk might correlate with family closeness. We included the demographic and individual characteristic measures and socioeconomic status measures also considered in phase two. We also included a measure of self-rated health (1 = fair or poor, 0 = good or better) and measures of family support and closeness. Family support variables included two items that asked respondents how much they can open up to their family and friends and how often do family members and friends let them down, with responses ranging from not at all (1) to a lot (4), and an item that asked “when I run into financial difficulties, I can rely on others in my family or community to support me.” Responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Finally, we include a rating of family closeness using a Venn diagram as a visual aid. Respondents were asked to indicate the closeness they felt to their family relative to how overlapping the circles were, ranging from no overlap (1) to almost completely overlapping (5).

Table A.1. List of Topics Related to Broad Topic Categories

Topic	Narrative Subtopic labels
Family	holidays, kinship, younger generation, formal transitions, family history, abuse and conflict, tracing lineage, children, transition moments, older generation
Health	well-being; injuries; psychological stress; illness and treatment; alternative medicine; psychological distress; systemic illnesses; inflammation; specialists; tumors and conditions; family health; fatigue and cold symptoms
Work	engineering and aeronautics; professional jobs; military; remuneration; facilities and related work; family members’ jobs; occupations, trades; pink collar and low/middle management; industrial; transportation and machinery; therapy and rehabilitation; office work in industry; tracking processes and tools; schedules; blue collar work tasks
Religion	scriptures and learning; morality; Christianity, belief and prayer; denominations and beliefs
Criminal justice	court procedures; violence; political conflict; discrimination; police and enforcement; enforcement and intimate partner violence; emergencies and incidents; legal processes

Source: Authors’ tabulation.

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