"Close to Home": The Work of Avoiding Politics

Nina Eliasoph

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

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

It took what I will call "cultural work" for volunteers to transmute feelings of powerlessness into expressions of self-interest. Coming from a range of perspectives, many theorists of public life argue that structural powerlessness, inner feelings, and cultural expressions cannot be distilled out of each other; each layer of experience depends on the others -- and the public sphere is vital precisely because these levels of experience never match up perfectly. This article spotlights three moments in the intellectual, emotional, and interactional process of everyday political meaning-making: citizens' 1. implicit knowledge about their own structural power, 2. implicit agreement about what kinds of feelings citizens should have, and 3. implicit agreement about what the very act of speaking about politics in public means.

The illustrations I use to make this article's theoretical point come from a study that examined how political disengagement was socially produced in interaction, and was not just a by-product of "inner" beliefs or "outer" structural conditions. I spent over two years from 1989 to 1991 as a participant-observer in a range of groups in U.S. civil society: two recreational groups, both at a country-western dance club and fraternal organization; and a network of volunteer groups, including,

with most intensive scrutiny, an anti-drugs group and a PTA-style organization; and two activist groups -- an anti-toxics group and a disarmament group. I picked these groups because advocates of democracy have long looked to groups that work on small, local issues as potential schools for wider political concern. I wanted to know what happened within these groups that evoked, or curtailed, public concern for the publicly-minded political discussion (which I define not as a topic but as a style of and the political conversation ever happened, and whether groups seemed actively to avoid political conversation.

In all the groups, I did whatever other regular group members did: go to meetings, hearings, demonstrations, rallies, track meets, fairs, parades, fashion shows, rodeos, theme parks, and parties. I listened to participants' interactions with each other in a wide range of contexts, and to their interactions with the institutions that surrounded their groups -- social service agencies that worked with the volunteers, government agencies that dealt with activists, country-western commercial culture that surrounded recreation group members. I was also a participant-observer among local reporters, and analyzed news stories. The larger study shows how citizens made fine, relentless distinctions between what was salable in one context and another; citizens sounded more public-minded in casual or intimate contexts than in public contexts; the wider the audience, the narrower were the ideas that could express. This article focuses mainly on interviews, but without the understanding "close to home" refrains over and over from volunteers, I could predict the responses to my interview questions: in other words, until the "category was saturated," to use a standard criterion for feeling satisfied, as an observer, that one has indeed found a pattern.

Power, Emotions, and Talk in the Production of Limited Horizons

Clue #1: Intuiting powerlessness: "What am I going to do -- bomb the place?"

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

I know there are things out there that affect me, you know, they, uh, bother me, but I guess I -- my first priority is my home and my immediate surroundings and I'm not anxious to go out and solve the problems of the world. I guess it's just my personality, I took them on as "personal," as her personal responsibility to solve all these things (everyone would love to, if they had the power themselves, to stop war and end drug abuse when you're dealing with issues like that). But down to just, "find the opportunity in
A moment later in the conversation, he refers to this statement, summarizing it this way: "That gets back to— if I'm gonna actually expend energy to alter my lifestyle to affect one of these things, I'm probably gonna expend it where it's closer to home." The way he himself summarized the long, earlier statement shows his method for actively, imperceptibly translating "a feeling of impotence" into a feeling of empowerment on small issues "close to home." This was to rename that feeling of impotence as a lack of concern. "Close to home" and "for my children" was a package for a cluster of ideas about caring, power, and truth. Animals, like the whales stuck in Alaska, drugs and schools were "close to home." Nuclear war, the local nuclear battleship station, the local protest against U.S. policy in Central America, the local proposed toxic incinerator, and the local oil and chemical spills and explosions were not.

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

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

Whenever I mentioned that all the groups I studied said they were involved "for the children," volunteers would reconsider the phrase for just a moment, say that indeed anything could be considered to be "close to home" and "for the children," and then, just moments later, all would revert to the "close to home," "for the children" discourse. This vocabulary of self-interest was so automatic, volunteers could not extricate themselves from it even when they rationally knew that it did not adequately describe their motives. This gerrymandered engagement might seem easy to explain. In appearing rationally self-interested, volunteers might appear to confirm the idea that people are "rational actors," that is, people who will bestow themselves to community action only when they think that time invested will be worth the personal payoff, and only when they cannot easily hitch a "free ride" to that personal payoff on other people's backs.

But if volunteers were rationally calculating where to invest scarce energy, it was a peculiar kind of calculation: as will become more apparent below, the goal was to feel empowered; they had to forget that there were wide arenas in which they did not feel powerless. If the work they did to divvy up the world into "close to home/doing able" and "not close to home/not doing able" had been conscious, it would not have had the desired effect, of allowing them to feel hopeful, powerful, and free. This is an unusual kind of calculation that works only when actors can forget they did the calculation. Instead of calculating individually, volunteers relied on a culturally standard, automatic second nature that taught them how to translate feelings of impotence into feelings of efficacy...

A second explanation of volunteers' speech would shift volunteers' sense of power and powerlessness onto the level of culture instead of the level of individual conscious calculation, by saying that after years of political domination, volunteers may have created a culture of silence, too helpless even to voice feelings of outrage, too powerless even to formulate their own interests even to themselves.

The idea of hegemony might mean people as members of cultures, who are doing their best to make sense of discouraging circumstances, even if it means turning their backs on politics. It treats political experience as a convoluted, uncalculating, historically specific, inherently cultural, and heterogeneous response to power and powerlessness.

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

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

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

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

Peter: Whether we admire it or not... someone like Gandhi, you know, he may be the pinnacle of altruism, but he was doing his stuff for his own people. [Murmurs of agreement... .]

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

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

Most of the time. Well, at least I'd like to think it's most of the time. Of course, I'm not so sure it really is. But I hope it is. So, I'd say "most of the time." Yes, put "most of the time."
Notice—neither yes nor no nor undecided was the most "real" belief here. The belief included an effort at convincing herself. In the interview with Caro, he and his eighty-year-old son, the son made less of an effort. Each time he said that people do not get involved because they don't think it will have an effect, his mother gently corrected him, saying that people just did not have enough time. Similarly, typical volunteers responded to the question, "Can a person like you make a difference?" by saying "Yes," with an "at least I hope so" tag on.

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

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

There are varied cultural rules for this cultivation and expression of feeling. For the unempowered volunteer trying to feel confident that democracy is working according to its promise — as in Artie Hochschild's examples of an unhappy bride trying to feel joy, a happy funeral attendee trying to suppress his glee, and a bad student trying to "psych himself up at a game" — there is "emotion work," that bridges the discrepancy between what one does feel and what one wants to feel (which is, in turn, affected by what one thinks one ought to feel in such a situation). In response, the individual may try to eliminate the pinch by working on feeling.1

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

The concept of emotion rules throws light on how hard volunteers worked to muster unequivocably upbeat feelings in group contexts. But a question remains: why did volunteers assume that the way to be upbeat was to avoid making the connection between the local and the global, instead of talking about their worries more openly, or complaining or venting outrage? After all, the volunteers were not peasants who could starve if they offended their lords, or victims of direct censorship who had to hide their criticism of the government; they believed that they were free to speak their minds. So why did they assume that appearing unequivocal and happy was so urgent? Exposing the rough edges of one's thoughts has often been considered the essence of democratic citizenship; George Herbert Mead, for example, would have said that good, active citizenship is supposed to be confusing, that thought itself is argument — that in the public realm, consistency is death.2 The question is how willing people are to exhibit the rough edges, doubts, and challenges in public. If the need to appear unequivocably upbeat is not just a fact of human nature, and no direct censorship prevented volunteers from voicing doubts, then how did they come to assume that the way to gain a sense of control was to avoid talk, avoid debate, when other groups gained a sense of mastery by talking? What was it about political talk itself that they feared?

Note: #3: "That's rhetoric.

Clara (a schools volunteer): A social problem is close to home if it affects you personally and your family... You can hold your opinions about what a country can do, or can't do, a difference unless they have the power at hand.

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

Volunteers assumed that citizens' talk itself would change neither individuals' opinions nor the political world. With different assumptions about how and where talk matters could come different emotion rules. For example, Patricia Walselewski shows that a pivotal moment in the life of a feminist group is when women learn to value anger, to talk about the causes of their anger, thus allowing righteous, collective anger to become a lever for critical grassroots action instead of a shameful,
private sentiment. Given volunteers' low valuation of talk itself, the best way to maintain faith and hope was to avoid expressing discouraging, critical, "cynical" thoughts and feelings in public.

Thus, in Parent League meetings, volunteers actively avoided talking about the race problems in the high school, the lack of funds for library books, heating, music, and theater supplies, and other potentially troubling topics that newcomers tried to raise. On the other hand, volunteers wanted to encourage these potential new members, but, on the other hand, they did not want to risk the sense of discouragement that wide-ranging discussion could bring. For example, the local NAACP representative came to one meeting of the Parent League to tell the group that a teacher had made racist jokes and that skinheads were recruiting on the schoolgrounds at lunchtime. He suggested getting more parents involved in the Parent League, so they could discuss these problems publicly. The parent volunteers (who were not, incidentally, all white, but who did share the distinctive "volunteer culture" I am describing in this article) barely responded, except to say that the NAACP representative should not underestimate them, because they "made efficient use of small numbers" of people, and they cited a very successful fundraiser the group held.

When teachers came to meetings trying to drum up discussion about funding for theater lights, or about limiting senior-year expenses for activities like the prom and the class picnic (that all together added up to over a thousand dollars), volunteers, who were usually extremely well-organized in their meetings, would wander in and out, play with their pens, and fall unusually silent. In an anti-drugs group meeting, Julie (a former anti-nuclear activist -- her confrontation with feelings of powerlessness was not the only thing that made her unusual -- she also sometimes tried to push volunteers to be a little more debate oriented than they were) asked what she could say when people argued against the group's plans; there was total silence following her question, until Julie brought up a logistical question. The consensus was that talking was not the point. Members had not explicitly decided not to talk; it was just part of their practical cultural work in the group.

The ability to express broad political engagement systematically changed from one context to the next. Behind the scenes, but not in meetings, Danielle could say that it was really a disgrace that a country as rich as ours had homeless people; she said that the school should make parents pay for kids to play in the school's swing band, and that Republican-sponsored cutbacks had harmed the school, and more. But she never spoke like this in the group context. Behind the scenes, she spoke enthusiastically about her work with the school district to plan ecologically-sound landscaping for a new school, but when she got to the meeting of the parents, the other parents translated her excitement about the general principle of ecological groundskeeping into "preventing hay fever in local kids." Behind the scenes, another volunteer was a very involved union activist, talked about connections between corporate flight and government policies, and had supported Jesse Jackson for president in an earlier election. But in meetings, he was very quiet and when he did speak, he sounded just like the others. Behind the scenes, Cora, the volunteer who confessed her feelings of cynicism while standing outside waiting for the janitor, offered quite a wide-ranging criticism and self-criticism session before entering the meeting: she said there were too many paid political consultants, too few informed voters, too many non-voters; and to give added bite to her point about her cynicism, she exclaimed with chagrin that, for the first time, she had voted for the Democrat, only because he had done her a favor. . . .

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

The point is that there was a culture of political avoidance, a common-sense understanding of what the act of talking politics itself means, not just that volunteers obeyed some natural urge to avoid disagreement.

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

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

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

Conclusion: Power, Emotions and Politeness in an Imperfect World

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

Understanding the tortured, twisted use of “close to home” helps show how these explanations are connected; the interconnections could help us interpret other public language as well. What if the things we call “beliefs” are always so equivocal? Then hope and hopelessness, apathy and engagement would not seem so far apart; they would always be intertwined, actively making sense of a world that doesn’t.

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

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

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

Notes