

Keeping Warm Cookies: Cultural Discourses of Fun Talk in Public Participation

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Abstract

Declining rates of public participation in the United States of America have raised questions about the sustainability and effectiveness of U.S. democracy. Some scholars have called for making democracy fun through the use of game design to make public participation more accessible. Using cultural discourse analysis, this study explores the locally situated communication practices of a civil society organization called Warm Cookies of the Revolution that seeks to (re)imagine U.S. democracy by making public participation fun. The research employs ‘fun talk’—a specific communication practice within public participation—as an analytical unit and found that fun talk served as a discursive hub of emotion with radiants of meaning connected to being, acting, and relating. In contrast to those who have argued fun democratic practices should employ game design to improve public administration, participants understood fun talk as a way to introduce them to civic affairs, form relationships with neighbors, and take action to improve their communities. The paper discusses implications for theories of emotion and affect in civil society scholarship.

Keywords: fun, affect, emotion, public participation, democracy

Keeping Warm Cookies: Cultural Discourses of Fun Talk in Public Participation

Public participation lies at the heart of civil society in the United States, for citizens are expected to participate in government decisions in numerous ways. For example, citizens are supposed to vote, and public officials are supposed to listen to input from constituents when making decisions. Government agencies hold public meetings where residents can offer input on proposed regulations (Tracy, 2010). Public participation discourses also manifest in subtler ways. Citizens are expected to adhere to the decisions of public officials (i.e., follow the law), and so public participation in political systems shapes facets of people's everyday lives.

However, public engagement, according to some measures, has been declining (Abramowitz, 2010). Rising income inequality is one cause, which significantly affects who participates in a democracy. Compared to the poorest 20% of Americans, the richest 20% '[are] responsible for 1.8 times the number of votes, more than 2.6 times the number of hours [working for campaigns and political causes], [and] 76 times the number of dollars [spent on campaigns and political causes]' (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012, p. 14). Declining trust in government is another cause. In 1964, approximately 80% of Americans reported trusting the government most of the time; by 2010, only 22% did (Pew Research Center, 2010). Income inequality and decreased trust in government create a negative feedback loop, where citizens participate less because they distrust government, which causes government to be less responsive to citizens, which, in turn, further decreases citizen trust and participation in civil society.

When citizens participate less, their democratic sensibilities, skills, and habits fall into disuse, which has significant consequences for American democracy and particular groups of people. When voter turnout decreases, young people, people of color, and people with less income are systematically underrepresented (Lowndes et al., 1998). Thus, 'the outcomes of

elections and other public participation processes do not represent the will of the people' (Lerner, 2014, p. 9). This leads to what Lerner (2014) calls double disempowerment, where marginalized populations possess less power at the polls *and* in between elections, because politicians only listen to citizens who voted for them in the last election and those likely to vote for them in the next election.

Making democracy fun offers one potential avenue for (re)imagining public participation. Political scientists have drawn on theories of game design to argue that those ideas could make democratic practices more participatory and enjoyable (Flanagan, 2009; Lerner, 2014). However, empirical examples often have been design-oriented with a focus on outcomes, rather than how communication practices *in situ* reflect meanings and practices of 'fun' (see Harvey, 2009, meta-analysis). Furthermore, understanding cultural discourses of fun in public participation could illuminate ways to intervene in (re)imagining American democracy. An affective turn in studies of public participation has begun to shed more light on the importance of feeling and emotion (e.g., Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013; Jenkins, Shrestova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015; Poplin, 2012; Young & Gilmore, 2013;), and this study extends that work by studying the cultural premises that constitute a specific emotion in public participation: fun.

Warm Cookies of the Revolution (WCR) is a civil society organization striving to make public participation necessary, just, and fun. Based in Denver, Colorado, WCR calls itself a 'civic health club.' As the organization explains on its website, 'Well, you go to a gym to exercise your physical health, a religious institution to exercise your spiritual health, and a therapist to exercise your mental health. Warm Cookies of the Revolution is where you go to exercise your civic health' ('About Warm Cookies of the Revolution,' 2013, para. 1). WCR

describes itself as ‘about fun,’ and it engages community members in civic issues by ‘creating innovative and fun arts and cultural programs’ (‘About Warm Cookies of the Revolution,’ 2013, para. 3). According to the organization’s executive director, WCR has engaged thousands of community members through more than 150 programs since its founding in 2012.

Relying on participant observations, official organizational documents, and video transcripts, this study provides a cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) of WCR, with the purpose of understanding how ‘fun’ was enacted and comprehended through talk at public participation events. Drawing on Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2002) concept of citizenspeak, this essay analyzes a specific type of citizenspeak I call ‘fun talk’ at WCR programs. I argue that fun talk among WCR members functioned as a discursive hub of emotion with radiants of meaning connected to being, acting, and relating. In contrast to arguments that fun democratic practices should employ game design to improve public administration in civil society, participants understood fun talk as an introduction to civic affairs, a way to form relationships with neighbors, and an opportunity to take action to improve their communities.

The paper proceeds with a brief description of WCR programs, followed by a review of cultural discourse theory and affective theories of public participation. The ethnographic research methods are then discussed, succeeded by findings and a concluding discussion of the study’s implications for (re)imagining public participation in civil society. Before delving into the theory that informed this study, a more detailed description of WCR and its programming is warranted.

Warm Cookies of the Revolution

Two terms are significant to WCR, and they require explanation. First, because WCR considers itself a civic health club, it calls those who attend its events ‘members,’ demonstrating their membership in the club. A ‘member’ can be anyone; no dues or fees are required to join

WCR, although, organizers recommend a donation of five dollars at each event. One does not have to attend a certain number of events to become a member. Instead, merely being present at a WCR event makes one a member. In this paper, I interchangeably refer to people who attend WCR events as ‘members,’ ‘participants,’ and ‘attendees.’ Second, WCR calls its public events ‘programs.’ For WCR, a ‘program’ is any public event that it hosts. Members attend these programs to engage in fun talk. In this article, I refer to such gatherings as both ‘programs’ and ‘events.’

The founder spent 12 years as a member in a theater company before establishing WCR in 2012, and the organization has implemented numerous programs over the years, including single events and ongoing series. Examples of prior programs include the Tax Day Carnival, where organizers hosted a literal carnival to celebrate putting collective morals into practice through paying taxes; the Stupid Civic Questions series, where residents ask basic questions about local government and its services; and the Netflix and Chill series, where participants enjoy a public film screening and then discuss social issues raised by the picture. WCR’s programs have covered a wide range of topics, including housing issues, zoning, taxes, war, terrorism, friendship, forgiveness, and love. In addition to discussions, participants have been treated to low riders, magicians, musical performances, dancing, poetry, and—as the organization’s name implies—cookies. Attendance at WCR programs ranges from dozens to hundreds of people, and at least one program usually is held each month. However, the frequency of programs varies because of organizers’ capacity to plan and implement these events, which are sometimes elaborate.

This glimpse into WCR and its programs sets the stage for the analysis presented later in this paper. Next, I discuss the theoretical premises that undergird this study.

Cultural Discourse Theory and Affective Participation

Cultural Discourse Theory (CDT) offers a culturally sensitive form of discourse analysis that treats culture as a system of symbols and meanings (Schneider, 1976). As the guiding theory of this research, I first identify its foundational principles and then discuss prior research related to the role of affect in public participation, a body of scholarship that offers important insights to make sense of how WCR members understood meanings of ‘fun.’

Cultural Discourse Theory

Donal Carbaugh’s (1989) CDT theorizes that cultural discourses are systems of interrelated thematic codes. These codes are comprised of subsystems of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings; and meanings consist of cultural premises. Cultural premises are a combination of the culture’s beliefs and values, and the premises express the meanings and sociocultural functions of symbols and forms (Scollo, 2011). Cultural premises answer the question: What do members of this speech community have to believe to understand communication in that way? Premises are the researcher’s postulations about cultural assumptions related to the nature of personhood (being), communication (acting), social relations (relating), emotions (feeling), and living in the world (dwelling) (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, & Malkowski, 2016). CDT theorizes communication such that social interaction and culture are integrated. The purpose of CDT is to ‘examine communication practices situated in scenes and the cultural discourses that are immanent in, radiating through, and composed of them’ (Scollo, 2011, p. 13). Thus, analyses of interaction are not separated from cultural context, and analyses of cultural discourses are rooted in local interlocutors’ communicative actions and habits.

Communication practices and cultural discourses are two foundational constructs in CDT (Carbaugh, Gibson, & Milburn, 1997). A communication practice is ‘a pattern of situated,

message endowed action that is used in a scene(s)' (Carbaugh et al., 1997, p. 6). A seemingly infinite amount of communication practices exists, including sharing (Carbaugh, 1989), naming (Lie & Bailey, 2017), and sitting (Nuciforo, 2016), and listening. This study explores the communication practice of fun talk at WCR programs, which includes communication practices and symbolic forms that express and demonstrate fun public participation.

The second core construct of CDT involves cultural discourses, which are often comprised of multiple cultural codes. Cultural codes, as the simpler unit of analysis, constitute symbols, communication practices, symbolic forms, and their meanings. Cultural discourses organize multiple, related communication practices (i.e., cultural codes) in and across scenes, rules, norms, and their meanings (Carbaugh, 2010).

As an ethnographic practice, cultural discourse analysts adhere to three basic assumptions: (1) Communication is examined as what culturally situated people have made of it; (2) communication is cross-culturally variable; and (3) communication constitutes and organizes social life (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). CuDA calls for descriptive and interpretive analyses, with the goal of identifying cultural propositions and premises to illuminate discrete, taken-for-granted systems of meaning to make sense of particular communication acts. CDT conceptualizes communication as a 'sociocultural system of coordinated action' (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992, p. 159), meaning that CDT emphasizes what is common or shared among cultural actors. CuDA strives to 'render participants' communication practices coherent and intelligible,' with analysis both affirming participants' sense of the world and throwing it into sharper relief to generate creative insight from the researcher (Carbaugh, 1991, p. 336).

Altogether, the various concepts of CDT (communication practice, cultural premise, cultural code, and cultural discourse) and the discursive hubs of being, relating, acting, feeling,

and dwelling can be employed through CuDA to structure analyses and organize findings. However, to study fun talk, this study also draws on prior scholarship related to affective participation.

Affective Participation

The incorporation of affect theory into studies of public participation has provided a significant departure from traditional ideas of public participation. Since the Enlightenment, the rationality of citizens has served as the cornerstone of democratic civil society, with affect being consigned to a backseat behind reason (Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). Theories of liberal democracy also rely on the idea of *the public sphere*, ‘a forum in which the private people come together to form a public, read[y] to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion’ (Habermas, 1989, pp. 25–26). The public sphere was characterized as ‘the people’s public use of their reason’ in ‘rational-critical debate’ (Habermas, 1991, p. 26). However, theorists have begun to explore methods of public participation beyond the bounds of rational-critical debate. ‘More and more,’ Jenkins (2016) explains, ‘politics requires soliciting participation, getting people to tell their own stories and also working together to amplify voices that might once have gone unheard’ (p. 21).

The affective component of participation allows for more precise descriptions of the forms participation takes (Jenkins, 2016). Affect is an embodied experience, whereby the perception of a situation leads to a modification of the body, which then triggers an emotion and consciousness of that emotion (Deleuze, 1997). Affect also is an intersubjective experience because it is ‘subjectified through its connection to a body, thought, or idea, and desubjectified through (the potential of) interactions with other bodies, thoughts, or ideas’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 14). Emotion is part of affect, but affect extends beyond emotion to reflect a general

sensibility to and about the world. Affect modulates the intensity with which we feel something, not necessarily the emotion itself (Papacharissi, 2015). Affect, as an overall bodily orientation to the world, extends into one's ability to act and be acted upon (Siegworth & Gregg, 2010).

Affect is significant to scholars of public participation for several reasons. First, focusing on affective encounters between people and their environments enables researchers to examine the relationships between individual experiences and collective feelings and understand the ways affective life is mediated by social practices, including those of civic engagement (Anderson, 2014). Affect can form publics by tying individuals together, triggering concern about an issue, shaping how issues are framed, giving form to types of public participation, shaping relationships between publics and governing institutions, and shaping the possibilities of solutions to policy problems (Peltola, Åkerman, Bamberg, Lehtonen, Ratamäki, 2018). Affective phenomena are important to scholars because they fill 'the gap between content and effect, by providing a simple explanation that avoids the linearity of causal empiricism and integrates the complexity of network drives or forces working with, alongside, or against each other' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 16). Finally, affects are often expressed sociolinguistically as emotions (e.g., 'fun') and should be analyzed with an eye toward the social context in which they occur (Young & Gilmore, 2013).

Civil society organizations can function as significant places for affective public participation occur. Putnam (2000) described civic organizations (in that case, bowling leagues) as a significant context for civic and political exchanges in midcentury America. Although an unconventional site—similar to this study—bowling leagues were sites of play that were not serious in their goals but nevertheless offered shared spaces to strengthen interpersonal connections and articulate political values. Sites such as WCR are *third places*, informal meeting

spaces that are neither home nor work which are essential to community life, social capital, and civic engagement, and they are sustained chiefly through conversation (Oldenburg, 1997).

Hybrid spaces, such as WCR, ‘invite newer civic habits that deviate from the deliberative ideal but also democratize by inviting a turn to the affective’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 25).

Some civil society organizations can foster a *participatory culture*, defined as having low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, support for creating and sharing, and informal mentorship (Jenkins, 2007, 2016). Originally applied to fandoms, the idea has more recently been extended to the realm of participatory democracy and activist groups (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013; Jenkins, et al., 2016). Jenkins (2016) argues ‘critics miss something important if they do not acknowledge that our cultural experiences (our fantasies and our desires) often motivate our choices as citizens’ and that researchers can benefit from studying such organizations because it can expand politics ‘to incorporate new models of identity, affiliation, and change’ (p. 268).

Lastly, participatory culture groups can encourage members to reconsider their *civic imagination*. Civic imagination is ‘the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems’ (Jenkins, 2016, p. 30). A civic imagination has a utopian dimension, allowing members to reconsider ‘what could be’ in the realm of public life, and it allows people to identify potential barriers to the realization of that ideal. Jenkins’s (2016) concept of civic imagination includes practices designed to improve the quality of life and strengthen social ties within a community. That is, civic imagination is an affective concept whereby people feel bonded together through their collective vision of ‘the good life,’ and groups such as WCR provide opportunities to identify that common ideal through participatory culture that frequently is fun, playful, and creative.

Informed by CDT and affect theory, this study sought to understand one emotion that recurred throughout WCR members' descriptions of their experiences: fun. When Warm Cookies of the Revolution says, 'We are about fun' and that the organization 'engages community members in crucial civic issues by creating innovative and *fun* arts and cultural programs' ('About Warm Cookies of the Revolution,' 2013, para. 2, emphasis added), what do they mean? This project asked an essential question of cultural discourse analysts: What do members of Warm Cookies of the Revolution have to believe to understand 'fun' in that way?

Methods

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I embarked on this ethnographic exploration. Cultural discourse analysts commit to several essential research procedures, including descriptive analysis and interpretive analysis (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). This ethnographic research sought to explicate the ways that communication is constituted between interlocutors in culturally-dependent contexts by reconstructing how participants engage in conversation—in this case, 'fun talk'—and what that engagement means for them as it reflects cultural systems of social organization.

Data Collection

Data was drawn from participant observations collected at three public programs organized by Warm Cookies of the Revolution, video transcriptions from 11 videos posted online by WCR, and miscellaneous flyers and promotional materials distributed at WCR's programs. Participant observations were conducted in the Spring of 2018 in Denver, Colorado, and they totaled approximately eight hours, generating 23 pages of fieldnotes.

As part of their public outreach, WCR posts video summaries from their public programming to their website. The videos are intended to provide a snapshot of what occurs at

WCR events, and the recordings communicate to outsiders what WCR is ‘about’ and the types of experiences WCR promotes. To supplement field observations and gain a broader sense of WCR’s past programming, I transcribed all the videos posted to WCR’s website at the time of data collection. The videos totaled 28 minutes and 16 seconds in length and generated more than 10 pages of transcriptions. In addition to further immersing myself in WCR’s cultural communication practices, the videos served as a rich source of public-facing communication, a construction intended for unfamiliar audiences, demonstrating how WCR organizers explained their ideas and meanings behind fun talk.

As a final set of data, I collected miscellaneous documents and flyers at public programs. These documents ranged from WCR’s promotional materials to announcements about events hosted by other organizations. The various paper media were collected as a supplemental dataset to provide a holistic account of discourses operating in and around WCR members’ fun talk. The documents were not robustly analyzed for the purposes of this essay but provided relevant background information and context that informed the analysis of field observations and video transcripts.

Data Analysis

After collecting the various data, analysis was guided by tenets outlined within CuDA. First, a descriptive analysis was performed, which provided insight into who spoke, what they said, and what happened (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). The purpose of this descriptive analysis was to represent the discursive events that occurred within the data through transcription.

Following the descriptive analysis of data, interpretive analysis was then conducted, which ‘render[ed] discourse devices and sequences through indigenous frames or terms, thereby establishing a portal into the world of meanings being activated in the discourse’ (Carbaugh &

Cerulli, 2017, p. 5). For example, a member's comment about their experience at a WCR program, 'I got to see the way people are trying to combat these high rent prices other than constantly whining,' was coded as 'acting' because it was about how participants communicated at the WCR program (i.e., that there was no whining). The comment 'It's important for people to have a place of like spirit and mind to come together and feel like you're not alone in the world' was coded as 'feeling' because it was about how WCR members were supposed to feel when attending a program.

To validate the findings, I employed triangulation, wherein 'researchers make use of multiple and different sources ... to provide corroborating evidence' (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Locating evidence to document a theme across multiple data sources ensured that the findings reflected patterns of meaning within participants' talk that extended across space and time. Member checking also was conducted by creating a report for WCR staff members that summarized the findings, and staff members were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the analysis. WCR staff members unanimously agreed that the analysis reflected their understanding of fun talk within WCR and offered no suggestions for revision.

Interpretive analysis results were used to generate cultural propositions and cultural premises within the WCR community. Cultural propositions 'formulate what the analyst takes to be participants' beliefs and/or values by using terms participants use' (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017, p. 5); whereas, cultural premises move cultural propositions to a deeper, more fundamental level to provide insights into how certain meanings are valued by interlocutors. In the following pages, I present the findings, cultural propositions, and cultural premises as they connect to feeling, being, relating, and acting.

The Discursive Hub and Radiants of Fun Talk

In this analysis, key cultural terms were combined to construct cultural propositions, and the propositions are further developed into cultural premises. Fun talk operated predominately as a discursive hub of emotion, with radiants of meaning connected to personhood, relating, and actions.

Emotions of Fun Talk

Feelings of fun talk manifested in several ways. For example, when describing what attendees ought to feel at WCR programs, the founder explained in one video:

It doesn't have to be like [a] horrible lecture I'm gonna tell you why the world is just horrible, and you have to sit here and listen and feel bad and not know what to do. Also, I don't need to sneak it by you. It doesn't have to be like, 'Hey, come on into my rock 'n' roll church, man, and we're gonna – It's just rock n roll!' And then I'm gonna like confuse you with a little bit of God in there.

This quote reflects the founder's characterization of the opposite of fun feelings. Feelings of fun talk ought not to be 'horrible' or consist of a lecture. Fun talk also must not feel deceptive, where it 'sneaks' into communication practices because that risks 'confusing' people. Another member explained what brought her to a WCR program:

People are hurting, and we need to know how to help fix the situation. So talking among ourselves is one way to maybe come up with some solutions.

At another event, a different member expressed a similar sentiment, saying, 'And we hurt for that. *I* hurt for that.' Thus, members identified social conditions outside the program as painful. They recognized that both themselves and people in their communities were suffering. Attempting to alleviate that suffering appeared to motivate people to attend WCR programs to feel the pleasures of fun talk.

Members reported feeling connected to one another when engaging in fun talk. In the words of one member, 'It's important for people to have a place of like spirit and mind to come together and feel like you're not alone in the world.' For this member, WCR offered that place of connection through the fun talk of participants. Another member reported, 'The most important thing for everyone to do is care and get involved.' Fun talk, therefore, was intended to generate feelings of connectedness where everyone cares and is involved with one another.

Another important aspect of fun talk for members was that participants felt comfortable. The founder of WCR stressed the need to promote participants' comfort at programs, when he said activities need to be 'in ways that are comfortable and a little bit more accessible than just jumping straight into the street fight' of public advocacy. In a longer excerpt, the founder explained the overall feeling he hoped to accomplish when planning WCR programs:

We're trying to make a revolution of values, a revolution of perspectives. What's going to be comforting? What's gonna keep us questioning: 'Hey, what are the fun things? What are the cool things? What are the aspects we want to keep?' Like warm cookies. We want to keep those.

Thus, the 'warm cookies' from the group's name created a metaphor for what members are supposed to feel through fun talk. Warm cookies were seen as fun, cool, and they felt comforting.

Lastly, WCR members described fun talk as promoting feelings of hopefulness. At a program I attended, one participant said, 'I'm 35 and wanting to have hope in the next generation.' At that same event, the founder of WCR shared in a group discussion, 'I waiver on despair and hope, but I'm generally quite hopeful. ... I'm full of hope in terms of people doing

things.’ Engaging in fun talk thus helped members feel hopeful for the future, in that the negative feelings expressed earlier would be addressed and alleviated.

WCR members adhered to a cultural proposition that fun is verbally explained through contrast. Members did not want to feel ‘hurting,’ ‘horrible,’ ‘confused,’ or ‘hopeless.’ In contrast, members wanted to feel ‘connected’ to one another, ‘comfortable,’ ‘hopeful,’ and ‘better’ through ‘fun.’

Taken together, these excerpts generated the following cultural premises about emotions: WCR members believed that many people, including some of themselves, are suffering. They believed fun is created through connection, comfort, and hope. Expressing negative feelings is one way to generate positive feelings and thereby feel connected to one another.

Personhood and Fun Talk

One radiant of fun talk was about who could engage in it. The values of diversity and inclusion were captured in a series of interactions I documented in fieldnotes. At one event I attended, several interpreters translated presentations into members’ native languages. The languages included Spanish, French, and several Southeast Asian languages, with one interpreter present for each language. The event began with a poetry reading. A Latino poet coordinated the performance with the interpreters so that after each line he recited in English, an interpreter would recite the line in their designated language. I provide here an excerpt of the poem:

I am me and you, too

I am mother’s hands and father’s feet

I am growth, falling leaves

I am me; I am you, too

I am me; I am you, too

The poem itself conveyed the value of diversity for fun talk, while having each interpreter recite the line in their native language for all to hear further emphasized that anyone could engage in fun. The interpreters themselves were amused during this poetry reading. Before the recitation of one line, a Spanish interpreter approached the microphone giggling because the poet performed a dramatic motion when reciting the line, and the interpreter now had to recreate it. Later in that performance the atmosphere became light-hearted as some interpreters could not remember the words, and others added dramatic flair to their delivery. Thus, having various languages present contributed to the meaning of fun talk.

People who engaged in fun talk also were expected to be ‘open and aware.’ One teenage female member offered a suggestion for solving a community issue by saying, ‘I think that just being aware is the first step to anything.’ Another member portrayed the value of being open through contrast by saying, ‘We’re all colonized; our minds are colonized.’ He went on to explain that people in attendance needed to be ‘open’ to different ideas and experiences, so they could be more ‘aware’ of what was going on.

Finally, an optional component of the kind of person who was expected to engage in fun talk was someone who was ‘involved’ in their community. At one event, members broke into small groups to talk about potential solutions to housing issues. The group began with each member introducing themselves. These introductions offered a rich point to understand what discourses were present when people presented their identities to other members for the first time. One member introduced herself by saying, ‘I’m interested in all things community and equity and power-building and being involved with all things electoral and political.’ Later at that event, a member said that the goal of any housing solution should result in ‘a deeper way to be involved with government.’ Another participant framed the purpose of the program as getting

people to ‘be informed and engaged in the process.’ Thus, members could already be engaged and involved in their communities, but it was not a requirement for participation in fun talk at a WCR event.

Altogether, these quotes reflected the following cultural proposition: Those who attend programs ought to be ‘diverse’ and ‘intergenerational,’ ‘regardless of how you look.’ Members should also be ‘aware’ and ‘open’ to difference. It was desirable, but not required, for members already to be ‘involved’ with civic affairs.

These utterances generated the cultural premise among WCR members that everyone has the capacity to participate in fun talk and that having more diverse participation is better than less diversity. In order to achieve diverse participation, members have to be open, respectful, even celebratory of difference. Some members can already be informed and involved with civic affairs, but all members should be open to getting involved in their communities as a result of the talk that happens at the event.

Relating Through Fun Talk

Next, I turn to the communicative actions, or ways of relating, that exemplified fun talk. WCR members placed emphasis on listening and hearing each other. One participant, when reflecting on her event experience, said in a video, ‘It’s really interesting to hear various people’s stories. Because otherwise, they’re just items in the news. There’s no face to them. So that’s really important.’ At an event that was part of the Netflix and Chill series, members watched a documentary and then held a group discussion about the film. Members noticed that people in the movie were not listening to each other, which participants thought was problematic. When responding to someone else, one member said, ‘You mentioned that people in the movie were mostly white. You mentioned that their voices weren’t being heard.’ Another member later

remarked at that event, ‘I’m always encouraging collaboration and talking. But if no one is listening, then there’s no conversation.’ Thus, hearing and listening were understood as essential practices of relating in fun talk.

In addition to listening, ‘casual talk’ was integral to WCR members’ means of relating. When describing a past program, WCR’s founder explained it as, ‘Just come and play games and talk about a civic issue.’ He described a sewing circle program organized by WCR, saying that members ‘stitch, and they just talk about things.’ At the Netflix and Chill program I attended, the founder began the discussion by saying, ‘Let’s just start with casually sharing. If people start dominating, we can change it up. We’ll start casual and see how it goes.’ Additionally, when concluding the discussion at that program, the invitation to disperse also was ambivalent. The founder signaled that the event was officially over by saying, ‘If you officially want to go [leave the event], you can go; if you want to stay, you’re welcome to keep talking.’ ‘Casual talk’ was emphasized to reduce social pressure on members to help them feel comfortable and willing to engage in conversation.

Non-verbal expressions were essential to relating for WCR members. Laughter was quite prevalent at WCR programs; I documented multiple, robust moments of laughter at five different events. At one program, stand-up comedians told jokes about housing issues in a home. The comedians stood on a stairwell while dozens of audience members sat on the floor or stood around the perimeter of the rooms and listened attentively. The audience laughed at the jokes and often shared knowing nods with strangers as they shared in the cathartic recognition of the absurdity of local housing policies.

Additionally, the non-verbal act of eating was understood as an essential component of relating. The organization is called Warm *Cookies* of the Revolution, and refreshments

(including cookies) were provided at every event. The emphasis on eating also was present in members' talk. At one event, the founder told attendees, 'If you do nothing else today, when the food comes, eat food.' Another program, called 'Soup and Dreams' was centered on attendees trying soups made by different community members. As the founder explained to the audience in attendance:

You're gonna taste six different soups from a variety of cultures and interesting people in our community. You're gonna hear from four organizations, but they're not gonna be talking about themselves. They're gonna talk about other organizations.

Breaking bread was seen as a foundational component of relating by building connections with others around the basic human need for sustenance.

Finally, various artistic expressions were prominent in WCR members' means of relating. WCR programs featured local artists playing music, including reggae and Middle Eastern forms of music. At an event I attended, a Southeast Asian choir sang several songs in their native language. Poetry was another common means of relating at WCR events. I documented how one Latino poet summarized the types of relating behaviors that were both present and encouraged at WCR events:

This laughter, these rattles, these little cries

We hear them

Ain't nothing wrong if you want to dance

We don't need no more trouble; we just want to dance to jive music

WCR members' talk reflected the following cultural proposition about relating: One of the best ways for WCR members to engage in fun civic participation was to 'just talk.' This talk was casual, about 'community issues' and included storytelling, 'sharing,' 'discussing,' and

‘having dialogue.’ When engaging in casual talk, it was important not to ‘whine’ or ‘be a jerk’ and instead ‘listen’ and ‘hear’ others. There were important non-verbal and artistic forms of relating, as well, such as eating food, reading poetry, singing, playing music, and laughing.

Based on these excerpts and observations, I developed the cultural premise that, within WCR, fun talk should be light-hearted and informal, with laughter, eating, and artistic expression maintaining a light and pleasant atmosphere. Talk should be about community issues, especially through storytelling, and members need to listen to understand each other.

Actions Associated with Fun Talk

For WCR members, after ‘just talking,’ members were expected to act. First, communication practices of relating were meant to generate solutions to community problems. As one member reported, ‘People are hurting, and we need to know how to help fix the situation. So talking among ourselves is one way to maybe come up with some solutions.’ At one event, the founder of WCR even led members in a pledge that everyone recited:

I swear to...do my best not to be a jerk tonight and further recognize that this is a fun evening with the potential to lead to some kind of meaningful actions, so let’s do this thing.

At another event, the founder told members, ‘We wanted to get your stories, your hopes, your fears, your needs. And specifically, we wanted to look at solutions.’

Two particular actions had to occur for members to generate solutions at WCR programs: ‘come together’ and ‘build.’ One member said, ‘We’re not going to see that [a solution], unless we find ways to bring people together and warm them up to the idea first.’ At an event I attended, one member told others, ‘Let’s pull our resources together, and let’s all pull in the same direction.’ Coming together could contribute to ‘building.’ As one speaker put it:

We're here together. We have an unbelievable opportunity to create the society that we crave to live in, and every single one of us and all of your friends and everybody they know, will be involved in building that together.

When discussing how to generate solutions, one member remarked, 'I think part of the answer is coalition-building.' Another emphasized the necessity of community-building: 'Action comes from that initial sharing and building a community of people that you trust and want to be around.'

When WCR members came together to build, several actions were associated with fun talk. These actions were playful and promoted imaginative creativity. One WCR program was called Stitch and Bitch, modeled after traditional sewing circles; another was explained as 'Letter writing night. Come, write a letter.' At another event, 'We meet in sports bars and watch games, and at halftime—or at some point during the game—we discuss sports civic issues.' Sometimes members would literally play games, as the founder explained:

Just come and play games and talk about a civic issue. But we did Monopoly, and we made it realistic. We said, 'Change the rules. Change three things right off the bat and make things realistic.' And people came up with incredible changes to how it works.

These creative actions were intended to foster imagination among attendees through a participatory culture. This value of imagining possibilities was demonstrated by a member who was a middle school teacher. She explained her approach to teaching as: 'I want to give them [students] a broad perspective. People are so focused and narrow-minded and not looking at the bigger picture. I hope that's what I'm doing with my kids [students]; getting them to look at the bigger picture.'

Members expected each other to continue engaging in civic issues even after the event ended. Fun talk was just one manifestation of other associated actions. These post-program actions sometimes necessitated the use of ‘power.’ At an event I attended, one member indicated, ‘Everybody is usin’ the word *action*. That’s a code word for *power*.’ Members offered several examples of powerful actions they were willing to undertake. One participant was willing to break laws:

If the law isn’t just, then we have an obligation to break it. If I were a parent, and someone said teachers in my school were going to carry guns, then I would have to break that law and keep my kids out of school. I would have an obligation. Or if they told me they were going to start taking DREAMers out of school, I’d break that law.

Another member expressed his approach to using power when he said, ‘When I think about what’s worked in history, I think civil disobedience has the most effect. Look at Thoreau, Ghandi, and MLK. They broke the law, but they were willing to take the penalty.’ One poet associated engaging fun talk with ‘pushing back’:

They kick, push to move us from our homes
We root down and push back
Dreams within our bones

Thus, fun talk was associated with forceful actions that could manifest after members left the program.

These moments led to the following cultural proposition: The purpose of talking and communication was to lead to action. WCR members were concerned about ‘solutions.’ These solutions were realized through ‘coming together’ and ‘building.’ Actions that occur when people ‘come together’ to ‘build’ include playing, imagining, and having fun. Playful actions

included ‘brainstorming,’ ‘playing board games,’ ‘stitching,’ ‘writing letters,’ and ‘watching sports.’ Members were expected to continue to perform specific actions even after they were done ‘coming together.’ These actions included being ‘engaged,’ ‘involved,’ and ‘participating’ in civic affairs. Finally, sometimes actions required the use of ‘power.’ These actions included ‘breaking laws,’ ‘civil disobedience,’ ‘pushing back,’ and ‘fighting.’

From this proposition flows the cultural premise for WCR members that communicating was meant to lead to activist social action. People should not talk just to talk. Instead, talk should *do* something that helps community members.

Discussion

Fun talk functioned as a cultural form of communication centered around the discursive hub of emotion with associated radiants of personhood, action, and relating. WCR members believed people are suffering and that positive emotions of fun could be created through connection, playfulness, and hope. Members also believed that anyone has the capacity to engage in fun talk as long as people are open to and respectful of differences. Fun talk was light-hearted and informal, with laughter, artistic expression, and eating that functioned as significant means of relating to one another. Members also believed that experiences of fun talk should lead to activism to benefit local communities outside of WCR.

These findings offer several implications for scholars of participation in civil society. First, many of the calls for incorporating ‘fun’ and ‘play’ into public participation have arisen from fields of political science and public administration (Flanagan, 2009; Lerner, 2014; Peltola, et al., 2018). However, feelings of fun sometimes have been under-theorized. For example, Lerner (2014) explained ‘fun’ as ‘inherently interesting. It feels good, not bad. And its pleasures are naturally rewarding. The point of having fun is to have fun’ (p. 15). This study has

contributed to that scholarship by understanding fun talk in public participation as a culturally constituted process expressed through complex communicative acts and grounded in participant experiences. WCR members embraced fun sensations such as laughter; they shared stories, strove for connection between members, and expressed themselves through ‘just talking.’ Notably, artistic expression was a significant component of fun talk for WCR members, including poetry, singing, and drawing, thereby identifying specific examples of how ‘fun’ manifested through public participation and the cultural premises underlying this type of engagement for WCR members.

Although some aspects of this type of fun public participation may not be surprising, a significant feature of WCR’s appeal to participants is its ability to reimagine civic engagement for its members. WCR members understood traditional public participation as difficult, stressful, even calling it a ‘street fight.’ However, WCR members worked to create a different civic imagination where public participation is marked by creative acts of poetry, singing, and dancing. Public participation, in this civic imagination, makes space for stand-up comedians and breaking bread with neighbors. Through this type of fun participation, civic engagement becomes a part of everyday life. It is associated with positive experiences that are encouraged through ‘just talking.’ The idea that anyone is welcome to engage in fun public participation simultaneously taps into traditional U.S. values of equality and counters feelings of apathy or inexperience that can cause citizens to believe they do not have the expertise to contribute to public affairs. Fun public participation, thus, is accessible to all, and it transforms the notion of civic engagement from a potentially frightening, serious activity into one that people can perform with relative ease in a supportive environment, opening the door to potentially larger, riskier forms of activism (e.g., civil disobedience, protest). Fun public participation afforded an

opportunity for members to feel their way into politics and develop civic habits that may deviate from the deliberative ideal, and, in doing so, expand the range of political communicative acts deemed legitimate by community members (Papacharissi, 2015).

To make public participation fun offers an example of how to create a participatory culture for civil society organizations. This type of participation ‘allows for the performance of democracy’ and takes ‘advantage of the existing civil reservoirs of, for instance, citizens’ knowledge and praxis, in turn activating and validating the citizens that are part of these civil reservoirs’ (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 281). A fun participatory culture, as outlined here, afforded participants an opportunity to create, play with different identities and social roles, and affirm one another. The underlying values illuminated through this cultural discourse analysis demonstrate how an organization may foster a participatory culture that creates space for personal expression and provides opportunities to feel that what they share matters, that they are counted, thus rendering an experience fulfilling (Coleman, 2013).

Additionally, this work builds on the relatively recent affective turn in public participation scholarship. Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) describe this work as descriptive, ‘trying to understand what makes participation more or less meaningful to those involved’ (p. 268), while simultaneously providing more refined vocabulary for terms of public participation. Fun public participation thus is not only about playing games or imagining fantastical scenarios. It can be a communicative process of dialogic encounter, where participants come to know one another through what WCR members describe as ‘just talking.’ Jenkins (2016) has shown how spoken word poetry, as a form of personal storytelling, can link individual stories to larger concerns. Similarly, the fun participation presented in this case incorporated poetry but also

music, sewing, and other creative endeavors that served to link individual experiences of inequality with larger social issues and (re)imagine a more just world.

However, this study of WCR has some limitations that suggest possible directions for future research. First, the amount of participant observation was limited, and much of the data was derived from videos that WCR produced for public consumption. Additional participant observations and interviews could provide further insight into what members learn, what motivates them to attend programs, and whether the fun experiences at WCR programs inform other types of public participation in the community. Second, CuDA is an interpretive method that emphasizes agreement on shared values within a community of study. Critical approaches could explore issues of power, contradiction, and dilemmas related to fun public participation. Finally, this research raises important questions for public participation scholars about the role of art and aesthetics in civil society. For WCR members, art contributed to fun experiences and served as a valuable process of relating and forming connections with one another. Historically, art has been a powerful force in advocacy campaigns (Abujbara, Boyd, Mitchell, Taminato, 2017). Scholars could draw on Bakhtin's (1984, 1993) ideas of aesthetic moments and carnivalesque spirit to further explore how beauty, creativity, and art contribute to the communicative aspects of public participation.

Conclusion

WCR members drew on a discourse of public participation as fun that shaped their experiences and communicative acts in significant ways. 'Fun' was not associated with aspects of game design, as some scholars have promoted (Flanagan, 2009; Lerner, 2014). Rather, fun talk was concerned with local issues, personal connection, and solutions that would benefit others. Through its participatory culture, WCR programs created a discursive space that provided

opportunities for members to create a civic imagination where people were treated fairly, and ‘changing how the American public imagines democracy may be a key first step toward altering how Americans perceive and treat each other’ (Jenkins, 2016, p. 36). Fun talk served as a discursive hub of emotion with radiants of meaning connected to being, acting, and relating, thereby providing opportunities for WCR members to expand notions of legitimate civic engagement as they strove to create a (re)imagined civil society.

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