This article explores the processes involved in the construction and contestation of community in New York City following the disaster of September 11, 2001. By employing insights from the literatures on disaster and cultural meaning making, we examine how New Yorkers created and negotiated the meanings of the cultural, symbolic, and moral problems that followed the attacks. Though this postdisaster period has come to be heralded as one that witnessed a spontaneous and uniform rise in patriotism, helping behaviors, and memorial practices, we demonstrate that New Yorkers actively contested and negotiated these terrains. We argue that the tension inherent in this contestation was rooted in uncertainty about identity, interaction, and the boundaries of community in the wake of the attacks, and that its negotiation resulted in a structure of feeling that was fraught with lingering inconsistencies. This was ultimately taken for granted and incorporated into the cultural framework of the “new normal,” marking the collapse of the acute liminality of the New York community’s postdisaster experience.

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center, commencing a series of events that would significantly disrupt the “normal” lives of New Yorkers and other Americans. These events, which have become known simply as “9/11,” have been chronicled extensively, both in the journalistic reports that began to document the disaster in its immediate wake and, with remarkable rapidity, in books marketed to the wide popular audience seeking to make sense of the attacks. Though these accounts differ markedly in their scope, emphasis, and intent, they all implicitly rest on what is now considered unchallengeable: that Americans had a more or less unified reaction to the events of September 11, that they suffered, grieved,
and became resolved as one, in the process renewing a strong sense of community often considered to have been in decline over the course of modern, postindustrial life.

This article explores this much heralded “return to community.” We argue that this relatively simplistic treatment of the postdisaster period conceals the complex interactions that characterized it. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, a plurality of reactions existed that had to be actively negotiated; the current treatment of the national reaction as one that was generally cohesive, linear, and largely automatic belies the complexity of this process. We seek to excavate this process by investigating the ways that New Yorkers actively constructed community in the days and weeks following the September 11 attacks and, importantly, the problems that were involved in this construction.

The events of September 11 are hardly the first historical events to be simplified in a national retelling, but their recency and their hyper-documentation provide a particularly good opportunity to examine the process by which meaning, and particularly the meaning of community, is negotiated. In addition, because what happened on September 11 was appropriated to signify the reason for the United States’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy, we believe that we offer an important empirical contribution in documenting the fact that at one time uncertainty abounded regarding what had occurred, how Americans should feel about it, and what it would mean for New York, America, and the rest of the world. Though it is now generally forgotten, there existed at one point in time a multiplicity of meanings that were created, fostered, and contested through active negotiation between people, as well as through interaction with public and/or official definitions of the situation. Indeed, an enormous amount of social work has been devoted to the negotiation of those meanings and to the construction of what is now treated as the “unified” reaction of the New York community, as well as of the nation as a whole.

In a larger sense, the aim of this article is to explore the processes involved in the experience and construction of community in the immediate wake of disaster. Importantly, we do not argue that people’s social and psychological faculties and the meanings they produce are mechanistically determined by official tools and agents, as a straightforward top-down perspective would claim. The story is not that there was a simple “imposition” of public meanings on a frightened populace dependent on TV and newspapers for their interpretations. Instead, we argue that the process of creating, promoting, and using these new meanings was a mutually influential exchange between powerful public images and local, personal interpretations and practices. In such a “back and forth” (or, perhaps more appropriately, “up and down”) exchange of meanings, it is often difficult to discern what information people have gathered from official sources and what they derived from themselves or their communities (Schildkraut, 2002). In the end, however, this distinction matters little for the purposes of this article; we seek not to trace the origins of meaning definitively but to document its evolving structure.

In our excavation of community-making processes, we focus specifically on the experience of New Yorkers. We do so because of the uniquely liminal cultural position that was occupied by New Yorkers in the wake of the September 11 attacks, both because of their physical proximity to the World Trade Center site and, more importantly, because of the particular configuration of social and cultural forces that interacted to create a unique set of problems and experiences for them in the postdisaster period. Following a discussion of relevant literature and a brief description of our methods and data, we discuss the qualities and nature of New Yorkers’ unique position. We then trace the processes involved in New Yorkers’ constructions of community following September 11, devoting significant
attention to the problems and dilemmas that were inherent to this construction. Following a general discussion of the processes involved in community construction, we examine three specific terrains on which the meaning of community was actively contested: patriotism, helping behaviors, and memorial practices. Finally, we discuss the negotiation of the “new normal,” a process that both occurred simultaneously with and marked the collapse of the acute liminality of the New York community’s postdisaster experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DISASTER AND COMMUNITY

For a few glorious moments, it seemed that the tragic events of September 11 might serve as the “palpable national crisis” that Putnam (2000) identified as necessary to galvanize and restore civic engagement in modern American life. Contemporary urban research, drawing from Simmel’s (1971, 1995) pioneering work on the nature of urban life and the attitude of reserve that it encourages in urbanites, has long explored a perception of growing distrust and social distance between urbanites and increasingly degraded sociability of urban communities (Anderson, 1990, 2000; Beauregard, 1993; Bellah et al., 1985; Jacobs, 1961; Powers, 1991; Putnam, 2000; Rieder, 1985; Sugrue, 1996; Wilson, 1980, 1987; for critiques, see Fu, 1985; Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Wellman and Wetherell, 1996). In the immediate wake of the attacks, the aptness of this “community in decline” thesis was questioned by many observers, who noted the effects that the attacks seemed to have had on America’s renewed sense of community; casual observances and media reports were further buttressed by preliminary survey data, which showed modest increases in public trust and involvement in national or community affairs immediately after September 11 (Putnam, 2002). Indeed, our own data show that one of the most dramatic aspects of New Yorkers’ response to the disaster was a sudden, spontaneous, and widespread shift in the configuration of impersonal interactions away from the polite distance, reserve, and caution that prevail as norms of regular engagement with strangers within a city.

These findings do not contradict data from the disaster literature, which has documented that a feeling of happiness or “euphoria” (Erikson, 1976, 1994; Wallace, 1956a, 1956b) typically sets in among survivors shortly after disaster. This phenomenon, thought to result from a recognition that the community is still viable and will be repaired despite its grave injury, is exemplified by the outpouring of support and kindness from neighbors and other relief workers (Erikson, 1994). The “therapeutic community” has been documented in a number of earlier studies, including Fritz (1961), Barton (1969), and Drabek and Key (1983), and was no less present after September 11 (Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2003; Marshall, Picou, and Gill, 2003; Tierney, 2002). Thus, it is generally accepted that in the aftermath of a disaster, social relationships are both strengthened and formed anew as a result of displays of altruism as well as renewed contacts with others (Kreps, 1984).

Beyond these insights, however, the sociological literature on disaster provides only limited direction for the framing of our theoretical perspective. “Disaster” emerged as a subfield of sociology in the 1950s, largely a result of concern over how the American public could weather a nuclear attack (Kreps, 1984). The developing fields of collective action and panic research (e.g., Orr, 1999), as well as the emergent work on disaster,
each sought to predict and ameliorate what might happen in the event of a nuclear strike (Erikson, 1994). As the fear of nuclear attack receded from the public imagination, the disaster literature maintained its early “social-problems” orientation, building up a body of literature concerned with predicting and preventing disasters, identifying their patterns and stages, and providing effective response and recovery (Drabek, 1986; Kreps, 1984; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977). The central concepts are generally emergent “roles” (Kreps and Bosworth, 1994; Kreps, 1984) and “structures” (Dynes and Quarantelli, 1994; Forrest, 1988) in the new (but not original) social order that develops after a disaster. One of the consequences is that the field has basically ignored questions of culture, community, and meaning making except as they are relevant to the question of managing victimized populations. The small amount of “sense making” that has been examined generally refers to psychological repair among those who have lost relatives or material possessions.5

We see disaster as an injury to the social body, to the fabric of social life. In taking this perspective, we follow in the sociological tradition of Erikson (1976, 1994) and Klinenberg (1999, 2002). Erikson’s (1976) study of the Buffalo Creek dam breach and his collection of studies of other disasters both explore the destructive and traumatic effects that disasters have not only on individuals, but on entire communities. Although his data are drawn almost exclusively from victims, the Buffalo Creek study produced an in-depth portrait of a traumatized community and the barriers it faced to “normalizing” life years after the event. His later (1994) collection of studies attempted to identify commonalities in the collective response to disaster across a range of settings and types of disasters. His work provides inspiration for the descriptive task we attempt. It also provides points of comparison as we discuss the impacts of disaster and our respondents’ meaning-making work on the New York community. We recognize that sociologists of disaster have reacted to this work skeptically. They have “seriously discussed” the classification of the Buffalo Creek study as a “statistical outlier” (Kreps, 1984) and have debated whether Erikson’s methodology was flawed, whether his intent guided his findings, or whether Buffalo Creek could have been a truly unique situation as absolutely nothing of the community remained to repair the damage inflicted by the disaster (Dynes, Billings, and Maggard, 1978). However, a permanently damaged community is neither what we intend to explore nor our finding.

Historical and cultural sociologists suggest another way to maintain this community-level focus in disaster studies. Scholars such as Abbott (1992), Aminzade (1992), and Griffin (1992) have argued that looking at historical events in a sequence makes it possible to reconstruct trajectories of social structural change. Sewell (1996) and Sahlins (1985) see single events as moments when actors are struggling to restructure the possibilities for social action in response to problems caused by old arrangements. “Events” can be conceived of as moments when previously taken-for-granted values and rules of action suddenly become problems and therefore explicit topics of discussion and practical negotiation (Fritz, 1976; Garfinkel, 1967; Merton and Nisbet, 1961, Sahlins, 1985; Sewell, 1996).

Although there are hints along this direction in the sociological literature on disaster,6 it is Klinenberg’s (1999, 2002) study of the deadly 1995 Chicago heat wave that provides the most rigorous empirical example of a disaster seen as an event. In investigating the disaster as an event,7 Klinenberg conducts a “social autopsy” to uncover the maladies in the social body that led to the otherwise preventable deaths of more than 700 people. Our approach is dependent on this “eventful sociology” as it sheds light on previously concealed aspects of culture and society, but our concern is not primarily with the everyday
workings of society that a disaster illuminates. Rather, we take the September 11 disaster as a sociological laboratory for understanding cultural change; in particular, we look at causes and forms of cultural creativity that took place in response to the shattering of previously unproblematic meanings after the disaster. In doing so, we take inspiration from analyses of cultural disruption, such as those of Sewell (1996), Sahlins (1985), and Garfinkel (1967).

CULTURE, POWER, AND MEDIA IN MEANING MAKING

The “cultural turn” in sociology (see Bonnell and Hunt, 1999) has resulted in a wide array of accounts and explanation of meaning-making activities. One of the most common approaches emphasizes the workings of power and domination in the production of meaning. Versions range from ruling-class theories like Mills’s (1956) power elite model that emphasize the class interests of those who control the means of mass communication, to the ideas of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944) and scholars such as Goldmann (1977) and Harvey (1989) who emphasize the homologies of cultural forms with relations of economic production and political domination. The most famous and debated work of this tradition is Gramsci’s work on hegemony (1971; see especially Althusser’s (1971) version) as the cultural combination of social and ideological tools of coercion and consent by which dominant and dominated social groups come to uneasy consensus about social reality.

For our purposes, there are some problems with this approach. The domination account is not well suited to dissect disruptive events like the September 11 disaster; it is better suited to more stable situations in which most interests and meanings are well established. These theories are also more suited to an understanding of discursive scales at a higher, more public level than the “on the street” source of our data. The perspective finds it difficult to make sense of meaning-making activities that are off the axis of conscious or unconscious conflict with powerful actors’ definitions. It has particular difficulty accounting for how diverse alternative views might come into being. The domination approach is thus too “top-down,” static, and monotonic to fit the situation we observe.

Indeed, what is most noteworthy in our data is the plurality of meanings, perspectives, and expression that flourished for at least six weeks after the disaster. Other theorists of the cultural turn have long stated that cultures are internally differentiated, contradictory, and that meanings are interpreted differently by various members. At the same time, these claims are usually expressed programmatically rather than explained theoretically (Sewell, 1999). Scott (1990) and Foucault (1980) typify an approach to this problem that puts the plural culture question in dialogue with the domination approach. This direction, followed by many (see Ortner, 1984), emphasizes the work of resistance in cultural and social practice that occurs in specific contexts in which relatively powerless actors engage dominant agendas and meanings. This approach identifies pluralities of meanings with the relational contexts of power within which actors find themselves. Meanings and practices, then, are conditioned by the social position of actors and the context of power, that is, whether social adversaries are present in the interactional setting, in which they are uttered. Although this insight has been developed most directly in contexts of domination and resistance between competing social actors, and therefore is most applicable to these power-drenched situations, we apply this insight by looking at the relational cultural
situation in which our respondents find themselves. Thus power is only one of the dimensions of relational meaning making we attend to; more relevant in our account are the immediate demands respondents faced in expressing local social solidarity (Durkheim, 1984) while negotiating other social meanings in circulation on a national scale that did not seem to fit the situation they were facing.

Williams’s (1963, 1977) idea of “structures of feeling” is particularly applicable for our purposes because it focuses attention on the lived, practical sensibilities people experience that precede official pronouncements of values, meanings, and the spirit of the age. They are “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt...characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone: specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (1977, p. 133). Williams is anxious to capture “culture on the street” that has not been ossified into the official statements of politicians, pundits, academics, or other elite figures. Also key is the term “feeling,” which suggests conceptualizing meanings not just as symbolic, discursive, or linguistic but also as experiential and emotional conditions. In this way our work is also indebted to Sennett (1998), Sennett and Cobb (1972), and Sewell (1996), among others, who emphasize the interplay of experience, emotion, and meaning. Thus in our research we are less interested in the public clash of discourses or claims about September 11—which would tend to overemphasize official and media sources—than the interplay of experience and meaning for people trying to live in what seemed to be a new world.

We do not claim, of course, that media did not play a meaningful role in the way that New Yorkers experienced the events and aftermath of September 11. Indeed, we necessarily draw from the insights of several traditions of media-effects research in our analysis. In the early days of media analysis, social scientists believed that people were easily susceptible to media influence; the so-called hypodermic needle theory dominated the field. This theory posits that the power of the mass media is so great that media simply inject their messages into the audience, and that those messages directly contribute to people’s behavior and their perceptions of reality. Though this conception of media effects was largely dismissed as a gross oversimplification by American empiricists during most of the later-20th century, it survives in many popular accounts of media manipulation and is a notable undercurrent in the theory produced by both the Frankfurt School and those who have followed in that critical tradition (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Marcuse, 1964; Althusser, 1971).

In the 1950s, scholars began to focus on media audiences, counting and categorizing audience members and attempting to measure the direct effects of communication on those audiences. This led to what has been labeled the “limited-effects paradigm,” which argues that individuals consider media depictions in light of what they already know from other sources and that their own social characteristics matter a great deal (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Holvand, Janis, and Kelley, 1953; Holvand, 1957; Sherif and Holvand, 1961; Klapper, 1960; Berelson and Steiner, 1964; Gans, 1962). In recent years, this approach has expanded to include the way that audience members generate their own meanings from their interpretations of media texts, with a particular emphasis on audience resistance to the preferred readings of those texts (Hall, 1980, 1982; Fiske, 1987, 1991; Fiske and Hartley, 1978; see also Ahearne, 1995, on the work of de Certeau). The approach, termed “New Audience Research,” views audiences as active producers of
meaning, rather than mere consumers of media meanings, and leans heavily on the semi-
optic understanding of meaning as a social construction.

The study of media frames, a particularly vital type of recent media research, also em-
phasizes the process of meaning construction. Following Goffman’s (1974) conception
of frame, media frames are treated as organizing principles for both the producers and
consumers of media texts (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson, 1992; Gitlin, 1980).
Much research in this tradition focuses on the changes that occur over time in both the
frames’ cultural context and the frames’ content and focus. However, this research tradi-
tion also accords a strong and relatively straightforward degree of influence to the media.
In this tradition, the media is seen as a site of struggle over the definition and construc-
tion of social reality by sponsors of different frames (Entman, 1993; Gamson et al., 1992;

Particularly useful for our purposes is the strand of media research that focuses on
media audiences. Though our analysis in the following pages is very much a study of the
social construction of meaning, we hesitate to embrace too enthusiastically the concep-
tion of media influence present in much of the research on media framing. Instead, we
draw from the argument, introduced by the limited-effects paradigm, that media influ-
ence and reception is mitigated by individuals’ social location and characteristics. We seek
to infuse this paradigm with the emphasis on meaning making found in both audience
research and framing research. However, we also posit that the limited-effects tradition is
inadequate in its definition of “location” and “characteristics.” That is, our data suggest
that the most important mitigating factors of media influence may not always be such so-
ciologically familiar social categories as age, gender, race, or class; in some circumstances,
the more relevant social categories may not be preexisting as such. Our data show that
in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the most important
social category for New Yorkers was that of their identity as New York bystanders. Thus,
our argument suggests that the limited-effects paradigm underemphasizes the mitigating
impact of experiential conditions on media influence.

METHODOLOGY

Our data for this project consist of approximately 250 source materials. At the core of
our data are more than 50 in-depth interviews with “bystander” respondents: New Yorkers
who were not personally endangered by the attacks and who did not lose close friends or
family in the disaster. We avoided interviews with those who directly suffered loss from the
attacks both because of the emotional distress that a rehashing would undoubtedly bring
and because we were more interested in the typical response than in the atypical.

We focus specifically on New Yorkers for several reasons, but foremost among these
is that, due to New Yorkers’ proximity to the event and the commonly held notion that
there is a demarcated New York community with its own unique characteristics, New York
proved to be an ideal location for acute observance of what might be called the “bystander
condition.” Most New Yorkers had no direct involvement in the attacks; they had not been
present at the scene of the attacks, nor had they lost anyone close in the disaster. At
the same time, they believed their experiences to be profoundly different from those of
the rest of America. Thus, they were caught between being participants in the drama,
not dissimilar to the victims, officials, rescue workers, and others with concrete roles in
the disaster, and observers of the drama, similar to the rest of the audience throughout America and the world. Indeed, we analyze how in the wake of the attacks, the resonant but relatively hollow “New York” identity— itself based on a population composed of a large proportion of domestic and international migrants—became one of the focal points for symbolic negotiation. As we discuss below, the meanings of being a “New Yorker,” and what that implied about normative conduct and perceptions, were called into question. In fact, two unexpected consequences of the attacks were, first, that this rather subjective identity was suddenly infused with aspects that were publicly negotiated and determined and, second, that individuals’ relationships to that formerly abstract identity intensified.

By focusing on New Yorkers in no way do we mean to imply that the intensity of fear and confusion produced by September 11 was solely theirs. Individuals and communities across the nation, as well as throughout the world, were subject to a similar multitude of emotions. However, because there is no feasible way to capture “all” of the United States in a social scientific analysis of this nature, we choose to focus specifically on New Yorkers, who experienced the attacks on a local level as well as a national one. Nor do we mean to imply that Washingtonians did not also suffer losses and experience cultural shifts in the wake of the damage to the Pentagon, merely that the contours of their experience, being based in their regional and communal identity, would differ substantially from those of the New York experience.

The interviews, which typically lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, were open ended; respondents were allowed considerable freedom in directing the discussion of the events of September 11. In each interview, data were gathered regarding the respondents’ experiences; feelings; their opinions about politics, political figures, and the media; and stories they had heard. This semi-structured format provided continuity across interviews while allowing analysis of respondents’ constructions of events: specifically, what they did during the weeks after September 11, with whom they talked, what information they got from where, what they observed in public and in informal circles, how their mood changed and to what they attribute those changes, how they put together a standard narrative of their part in the dramatic event, to whom they told it, and how their more overtly political opinions found a place in that narrative. These interviews began 10 days after September 11 and continued through November 2001.

In addition to our interview data, we collected and analyzed approximately 200 additional personal accounts gathered via email contacts, the Internet, the radio, and published sources. Particularly helpful were accounts posted on a number of websites about New Yorkers’ experiences on September 11, electronic weblog (blog) entries on the subject, written journal entries, and New York Times “obituaries” of the victims of the attacks, including interviews with some of the reporters responsible for them. These data were gathered through December 2001. We used these pieces of data mainly to supplement and triangulate our interview data, that is, in a qualitative way they helped confirm to us that our interviews were indeed consistent with the ways people were thinking and feeling about the disaster. We also used these data, personal observations, and journalistic sources to help build a general ethnographic sensibility about the disaster and responses to it. Unless otherwise indicated, all respondent quotes below come from interview data.

Respondents were located via snowball sampling, personal contacts, and approaching strangers in public places; hence, the sample is not representative per se, but does capture perspectives of individuals with a variety of race, class, gender, age, national, religious, educational, and cultural backgrounds. If there is any systematic bias in our sample in terms
of individual-level characteristics, it is that it may underrepresent people of low economic and educational attainment. New York, like other American cities, is highly segmented and stratified along ethnoracial and class lines (Massey and Denton, 1998; Wacquant, 1998). Our interviews and other sources of information derive from what might loosely be called the “mainstream” on-the-street community, and as such may not reflect the experiences of those living in the city’s many seriously economically deprived neighborhoods and those that have the highest concentration of nonwhite or non-English-speaking immigrants. As Thabit (2003, p. 6) notes in his account of the problems of East New York, a neighborhood in Brooklyn that is extremely poor and majority African American and Puerto Rican, “it is part of an alternate social and economic system. While many individuals grieved along with the rest of the city, while many lost jobs and haven’t found new ones, the disaster had no great emotional or physical impact on the community.” Thus it is important to note that the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1993) on which our data sheds light is the “mainstream” of New York, which is best integrated with the dominant (middle-class and white-oriented) rhythms of work, play, school, production, and consumption.

On the whole, however, the data give substantial purchase to understanding the broad experiences of New Yorkers. Although the sampling method does not allow inferential claims about New Yorkers on a strict definition of statistical validity, our real interest is in illuminating the complexities and processes of the active postdisaster community, not in documenting and cataloging the exact extent of the impact of the disaster. Acknowledging these limitations, we focus on the structure, range, and intensity of people’s experiences and practices, as well as on what their words reveal about the changing nature of social norms and cultural constructions. In this way, we align ourselves with the interpretive tradition exemplified by Weber (1949) and similarly exercised by scholars such as Schutz (1967) and Geertz (1973), which seeks to understand the changing character of norms by reconstructing the “webs of significance”—that is, values, meanings, symbols—that people “spin” in order to interpret and negotiate their worlds. Accordingly, we invoke quotations as evidence and examples to illustrate these processes.

IDENTITY, INTERACTION, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF COMMUNITY

Almost immediately upon realizing that their city was under attack, New Yorkers, like most of the rest of the world, began to construct meaning around what had happened. For most, the attacks were experienced as a shock, ripping away their sense of ontological security. Questions like “What happened?” and “Are we still in danger?” were followed rapidly by questions that were not as easily answered: Who could be trusted? Who should be feared? Who had attacked? Why? Who—or what—was it that they hated? These problems necessarily called into question the nature of the community and its boundaries, awakening an “enemy in our midst” type of suspicion.

Our data show that the need to restore ontological security was manifested in a concrete enactment of the search for answers. This was realized in attempts to actually explore and refine definitions of one’s own community.15 Day by day, the media publicized details of the 19 hijackers’ seemingly “typical American” pre-September 11 activities in cities and communities across the United States, describing their training at American flight schools, which went unquestioned by their instructors, and printing photos of them smiling and enjoying leisure activities such as swimming. The message here seemed to be that had
we looked harder, we might have seen the evil masquerading among us. In response, then, many individuals did try to look harder, and on a very practical level they worked to negotiate new boundaries and weed out those that could take the blame. Beyond mere suspicion, the need to identify one’s own community was so tangible that some developed stereotypes despite their best intentions, and some even acted on them, to their own surprise.

I found myself doing something very nasty. You know those people that walk around—in—you know the women in those veils and everything? Do you know what I found myself doing the other day? Two of them were walking down the street and I was walking the other way. And I looked at them and I went “HHMPH!!” You know, that’s not me. What an awful, nasty thing to do. But I did it.

Similarly, a Palestinian worker we interviewed reported enduring a barrage of insults from longstanding, formerly collegial customers during the days following September 11, and other respondents described their efforts to keep low profiles for fear of such prejudices. One second-generation Arab American, the owner of a small Mediterranean restaurant in Brooklyn, was dismayed by what he found when he arrived at his restaurant the morning after the attacks. Overnight, the glass door had been broken, and graffiti had defaced the outside of the building with various racial slurs, pro-war sentiments, and messages to “go home, Osama.” In the search for community, tensions that would likely have remained hidden in the pre-September 11 culture, that were unconscious, and/or that did not previously exist became, if not quite “permissible,” justifiable to some New Yorkers, albeit for a very limited period.

At the same time, social interaction and interdependence flourished among those whose appearance suggested no links to terrorists. In the days following the disaster of September 11, it was possible to talk with, walk with, crowd near, cry with, and comfort complete strangers in New York. Perhaps not surprisingly, our respondents reported this spontaneous camaraderie as a noteworthy pleasure. Most of these interactions did not involve the physical aid that was needed at or near the site of the former World Trade Center, but simply demonstrated the almost reflexive desire to seek solidarity with others once the previously taken-for-granted normative and interpretive frameworks had been disrupted. One young white female respondent described this in the following way.

The coolest thing, the coolest and the scariest, was everybody on the street was talking to each other. Making sure everybody had a place to go . . . And people you wouldn’t normally see talking, too . . . it was really cool. This African-American guy approached me as we got closer to the hell part of Hell’s Kitchen where I live. And we were just walking and talking all the way until I got to my door, which I thought was actually really nice. Um, it was kind of cool the way New Yorkers really came together. But it also scared the hell out of me because that’s not how we normally are [laughs]. So, you know, it kind of drove home the fact that something big was happening.

Experiences like this one were reported all over the city. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, people gathered in groups in parks, on street corners, around parked cars with their radios turned up. They asked each other for news and opinions and traded stories of their experiences. A number of our respondents reported leaving their apartments after learning about the attacks with the hope of encountering people they could be with, or
huddling around TVs on the street with strangers even when the same news was available at home.

During this initial period, until approximately two days after the disaster, the intense interactions between relative strangers had a number of features. First, many respondents reported that although they felt deeply unsettled about the initial reports they encountered about the disaster, the extent really sunk in only after they interacted with other people, whether known or strangers. As one respondent remembered: “It didn’t hit me until I talked with this guy in a suit, all covered in ash. He’d been right there when it [the attacks] happened, and his eyes were haunted. It just made it real for me.” Similarly, one New Yorker’s blog stated: “My mother called and was really tense, and after that I realized how big it was. She’s a psychologist, and she’s usually fairly calm.” This finding resembles those of scholars such as Maynard (1996), who argues that the reception or “realization” of bad news is enhanced when a social relationship is established between parties. It has similar parallels in Wagner-Pacifici’s (1987, 2000) argument that people take cues about whether their situation is normal or an emergency from others’ behavior.

Second, the people who participated in this interactive work during this period were exposed to a wide variety of experiences, opinions, news, rumors, interpretations, and so on. Thus, in addition to getting information from the news media and official sources, they were forming an independent basis for judgments and ideas. This is not to say that people normally receive information passively from the media (indeed, see Hall, 1980, 1982; Fiske, 1987, 1991, for arguments that oppose the idea of passive reception) but simply that, during this disaster, a spontaneous “public sphere” had emerged with an acceleration and force not usually seen in modern, nondisaster, urban America, during which the empirical, moral, and political issues relevant to the attacks and to the community could be debated. In addition to these discursive functions, these arrangements served to enhance a sense of community and solidarity among New Yorkers. One woman described the interaction of both these functions of the emergent public sphere.

I finally started feeling better and I decided I had to leave my house on Saturday night [September 15] and I went to a party in Brooklyn. It was really good to be around people and a lot of conversations kept coming back to it... But it was good to be around people who were talking about something other than that, too. I actually had some good discussions on film and music and forgot for two seconds about all this. It just felt great to be around other people and the woman I was with at the party had gotten completely drunk and kept saying over and over again, “Let’s celebrate life. I want to celebrate life.” And although it was comical at the time, she kept saying it. She really felt that way. She just wanted us all to be glad for being there and having each other and you could see that around... We were in Prospect Park and it was teeming with people, families having picnics and playing together. Really, everybody.

This emergent set of norms, which lasted as a widespread phenomenon for only perhaps six weeks, also enabled the feeling of distinctiveness that was important to the development and sustenance of the condition unique to New Yorkers. Both initially, when interaction with strangers had a very free character, and days later, when the interaction was relatively more settled and people were more likely to intensely engage with acquaintances rather than total strangers, this public sphere became an important testing ground for people’s experiences. In particular, the exchange of stories and opinions facilitated here became the means for interpreting, questioning, and often criticizing accounts of the disaster,
the actions of some of those dealing with it, and also the character of the suffering city and nation that had been and would continue to be promulgated in official and media accounts.

Indeed, wider claims of solidarity and sympathy provided significant incentive to the evolving effort to establish community. National and international statements that “we’re all New Yorkers now” were meant to show symbolic solidarity with the victims, heroes, and the city at large. Although respondents often mentioned these sentiments with appreciation, they also asserted a great deal of skepticism about the intent behind such solidarity. Specifically, many felt that some public figures might be trying to appropriate the New Yorker mantle for their own purposes. Others wondered how long these claims would last and whether they would actually lead to the promised resources and support for the reconstruction efforts. At the same time, officials began using slogans like “we’re all in this together” to build on the feeling of a citywide supportive community, with leaders like Bush and Giuliani calling on this sentiment to warn against a backlash of hate crimes.

Further complicating matters, the preexisting, symbolic image of New Yorkers as diverse, tolerant, or cosmopolitan was repeatedly invoked in the effort to reestablish community. The blurred social boundaries only reinforced this prideful characterization of New York City. Some respondents therefore refused to identify New York City as representative of America, claiming instead that it more fittingly represented the world, and thus did not warrant such destruction.

They started a war against the whole world. This is not “America,” this is New York, it’s something different, it is multi-cultural. We made it—the Africans, South Americans, Europeans, Asians, Australians, North Americans—they created this city that belongs to the world. And that’s why the whole world is violated.

As this struggle continued, the dilemma about who is “in” and who is “out” began to take new forms. Ultimately, as the threat of further attacks waned, most New Yorkers decided that the attackers were “foreign” to the community and, thus, they did not represent a danger within. In effect, many inverted their concern by construing the danger to lie in distrust itself, that is, distrust as dramatized through xenophobia and violence against Arab people and those who (seemed to) resemble them. For example, following the vandalism of the Mediterranean restaurant in Brooklyn mentioned above, its owner found himself inundated with notes and cards of concern from members of the surrounding community, who expressed horror at the hate-filled messages: “They [the notes/cards] all said that they care, that I belong, that we’re wanted here. People asked us not to leave, not to pay attention to the hate. One said, ‘Hate is the enemy, not you.’” Indeed, neighbors made a point of supporting the restaurant for many weeks following the attacks and that gesture of “local activism” allowed the business to remain stable in the tumultuous economic period that followed.

Simply put, the familiarity, engagement, solidarity, and politeness by which people came to judge their interactions and perceptions were much more nurturing of connections and tolerance than they were of distrust (although distrust did play a continuing role in interactions as well). Our respondents were much more likely to use approving synonyms for the “cosmopolitan,” “multicultural” character of New York than to voice distrust of strangers.15 This was echoed—and partially cemented—by the calls for tolerance and warnings against bias crimes by Giuliani, Bush, and other public figures.15 Further, the fact that no further incidents occurred that could plausibly be linked to individual
CONTESTING THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY

New Yorkers or groups among them meant that the cosmopolitan interpretation of the New York community was progressively easier to latch onto. Regardless of whether respondents truly agreed with the culture of tolerance, they at least came to believe that it should appear to be the norm.

However, while people enjoyed most aspects of the reduced standards for social distance, the new arrangements required ongoing renegotiation through uncharted moral territory. Some respondents, for example, reported outrage or uneasiness at observing people enjoying themselves on September 11 or soon thereafter, even though most of them could not identify exactly what was wrong or why they were upset, and many of them were guilty of similar behavior themselves. As one respondent described:

My neighbor was sun tanning at 2:00 or 3:00 [on the afternoon of September 11] . . . I was sitting at my window talking, smoking, blowing smoke out the window. I sit at the kitchen window a lot. And I looked down and it was my neighbor, she’s a woman in her 30s or something. Younger, maybe. And she was getting sun. Smiling! I don’t think she knew. I didn’t think she knew. I didn’t tell her but she freaked me out. I wanted to yell to her, “Don’t you know what the fuck is going on?”

Another responded stated:

One thing that was bizarre was that looking out my window [after the plane crashes into the World Trade Center] I could see . . . people up on the rooftop and someone was getting their picture taken against the building as it was on fire, like it was just a camera setup and that was it. I mean, I myself took a picture of the building; I just had a camera lying around, so I just took a picture of it being on fire from my window, out the window. But it was shocking to see someone casually posing up against the burning building.

A series of problems and uncertainties were emerging in the negotiation of morally proper interaction and the “public sphere,” and their emergence resulted in the establishment of a practical activity of community making and interpretation. Indeed, partly because New Yorkers’ liminal position was characterized by being “involved but not really involved,” this uncertain, novel cultural condition confronted individuals with a number of dilemmas. Structural and cultural shifts brought certain values into the public eye, posing new ideological questions for those individuals in this middle position. Although the heightened levels of interaction encouraged renewed civic interest, making many individuals aware of a sense of collective responsibility they did not realize they had, the inescapable community atmosphere of mourning and the increased fervor of communication after the disaster meant that interacting in public eventually became more stressful than usual for New Yorkers. In the following section, we examine three specific terrains within the New York community in which New Yorkers actively worked to construct and contest meaning.

CONTESTED TERRAINS OF COMMUNITY

PATRIOTISM

One of the primary ways that the problems of meaning about community was dramatized was through patriotic expression and display. Beginning on the first day, patriotism was
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A publicly encouraged and sanctified way to portray solidarity and to create a sense of community. Vigils and memorials sprang up in public spaces citywide. People flew flags from their homes and adorned their cars and clothing with them. The ubiquity of this display was so strong that in some neighborhoods the red, white, and blue swathed blocks resembled the Impressionist paintings of Paris after Armistice. For some respondents, the size and spontaneity of the sentiment was a startling and comforting sign of a large, unified community.

At first, I didn’t feel patriotic myself. My first reaction [after the attacks] was I said I’d just leave, I’d go to Canada. I didn’t want any part of it. But then I saw the reaction of people, doing USA chants and stuff and it made me feel great about this country. It’s almost like a sports event, when people want their own country to win, and their support is inspirational.

Some bystanders embraced the traditional meanings of patriotism in supporting the government’s path to resolution, calling for “bombing the bastards” and proclaiming desires to enlist in military service. But for many others, the public expression of patriotism involved a dilemma: How could patriotism’s association with sentimental and exclusionary views of the nation align with the cosmopolitan, worldly image of New York City? Celebrating working-class heroes fit well with patriotism’s working-class connotations, but the stigma of adopting a perspective associated with privileging whiteness and condoning exclusion (Lipsitz, 2002; Richardson, 1993; Sidanius et al., 1997) held sway as well. The following passage from one respondent, which conveys her uncertainty as she struggles to describe her opinion, juxtaposes these two oppositional positions well.

A few days after [September 11], I was down in the Village and this guy, he had “Don’t Tread on Me” shirts that he had silk screened by hand, with the flag behind it. And it had “God Bless America.” And he also had these shirts with the peace sign on them. And I snatched them up: “I want that.” Before, I would never buy that shirt, but I was like, “Cool, yeah.” It wouldn’t have been cool before. I would have thought it was kooky…You see people and think, “Oh, what a good ol’ boy, U.S. of A! Oh, please.” It’s like red-necky to me or something to be so patriotic. But, I don’t know, I thought it was…cute. The American flag, it’s cute.

This respondent demonstrates the ambivalence many felt about patriotism, which was quickly becoming the symbolic medium for expressing solidarity, particularly in public. This situation mirrored the liminal cultural position of New Yorkers stuck between the experiences of victims and heroes at the disaster site and regular Americans. This respondent chose to play with the meanings—redefining the flag as “cute”—in order to appropriate them.

New Yorkers responded in a number of ways to these dilemmas. Some eschewed more well-known patriotic symbols, such as the American flag, and chose instead to express their solidarity by engaging in rituals that were not already appropriated by traditional definitions of patriotism. The following exchange between respondent and interviewer captures such a choice.

R It’s nice in some ways to see [displays of patriotism] because especially in the youth culture that I’m in, it’s always very much “Americans are so evil” and “We’re doing
all the wrong things” and it’s nice to see an appreciation for our country. But it seems misguided in a lot of ways.

I How is it misguided?

R Well, you’re only being patriotic now because you feel we all need to hate somebody else. Why should we need to need to hate somebody else in order to love our own country?

I Have you been displaying flags?

R I haven’t. I have, however, been putting candles in my window. A lot of people in my neighborhood have been putting candles in their windows every night. And that’s not a patriotic thing, obviously; you do that more as a respectful thing. I feel it is more for my self. Maybe doing it and buying the candle makes me feel a little better, and I feel better when I see my neighborhood [with candles].

Some respondents also sought to play with the meanings here to create newer, more critical versions of patriotism, in which they drew on particular aspects of their local community to inform their patriotic observance. One prominent example is the proliferation of “New York patriotism,” expressed through flying New York City flags or choosing to wear black during the “Red, White and Blue Dress Day” organized in many business offices. As one respondent said, “I’m a New Yorker—I’m gonna wear black.” One naturalized New Yorker explained:

I think I feel more like a citizen of New York than of the U.S. What I really feel like I belong to is the city. This is my community. I feel much more attached to New York than to America in the general sense. I mean, I feel very happy in this country and everything, but it’s not mine like New York is.

In addition to distinguishing a critical, cosmopolitan interpretation of patriotism, defining patriotism as New York-centric served, yet again, to separate New Yorkers’ experiences from those of the rest of the nation. It helped them differentiate their experiences and turn the liminal experience of being a New Yorker during this time into a source of positive value, perhaps even authenticity.

Still another variant in the traditional patriotic ideal were the obligatory displays that quickly festooned taxis, bodegas,17 and ethnic restaurants after September 11. It was not lost on most New Yorkers that many of these businesses were owned by ethnic minorities, particularly Arab Americans, who seemed to fear association with “the enemy,” and thus the pictures of American flags and the World Trade Center towers and the defiantly pro-American slogans that were displayed so prominently in the windows of these businesses engendered not inspiration but sadness and shame in many New Yorkers. Amid reports of violent “retribution” against Arab Americans throughout the country (including periodic reports of such activity in New York), the necessity of the displays was too obvious and seemed too obligatory to be purely sentimental.

If New Yorkers experienced some discomfort with the dilemma of traditional patriotism, however, official definitions were not able to capture or address the nuances inherent in “New York patriotism,” though they did provide a backdrop for the construction of the creative definitions that New Yorkers employed. Indeed, pushing the image of a broad, national consensus uniting the nation served both the national media and the Bush
Administration, and it may have also helped some Americans with the healing process. The effect, however, was ultimately polarizing to many of our New York respondents, and the mismatch between the official definition of the situation and New Yorkers’ varied interpretations of it led many individuals’ initial ambivalence to become outright resistance. This polarization is expressed in the following comment.

When I see flags displayed in the windows it annoys me now. Sometimes I go to these restaurants and every single one has a flag. And, you know, I really can’t believe every single restaurant actually wants to put a flag in the window. So there’s obviously some pressure to stifle any kind of dissent and have some flag and some even have whatever is written on them. I can’t remember what they say on them. I guess I understand that if there’s ever a time to be patriotic, let’s say, this would be the time, but I don’t like that. I’m not in favor of it, or even this kind of tough talk: “We’ve got to do this, we’re going to win, we’re the greatest.”

As this example shows, on-the-street resistance to official and national definitions remained and was even strengthened for a substantial period of time, rather than being immediately converted to acquiescence. Yet maintaining this resistance indefinitely was difficult, particularly as time went on and much of the solidarity, friendliness, and easy communication of social interaction in the weeks after September 11, which had validated New Yorkers’ alternative interpretations of the situation, began to fade. The tensions, uncertainty, and mixed feelings in the expression and maintenance of these varieties of patriotism, then, dramatized New Yorkers’ liminal cultural location.

HEROISM, VICTIMHOOD, AND HELPING

As in most disasters, bystanders’ attempts to help with relief efforts, to mend and heal the community, were almost immediate (Erikson, 1994). In this case, the need to help and participate, frustrated by the limited avenues for participation created by organized response, exemplifies New Yorkers’ liminality in the post-September 11 period. Both “heroism” and “victimhood” became almost sacred terms reserved only for the exalted and the officially appointed, further distancing most New Yorkers from the events and contributing to the liminality of the bystander condition.

Helping with relief efforts was the initial medium for collective engagement with the disaster; it was a way of enacting the multiple needs for connection, involvement, and expressions of community. In the aftermath of September 11, probably every New Yorker wished he or she could dig a survivor from the rubble; unfortunately, not even many specialists were afforded this experience. Food, money, medical, and other supplies overwhelmed the channels established for their collection. In the first few days, hundreds of potential blood donors had to be turned away. Volunteers waited days to be told whether there was any role they could play, however minimal. With most bystanders’ spontaneous efforts rebuffed, a clear boundary was set between helpers and nonhelpers. One respondent who was setting out for his regular jog on the morning of September 11 ran to the scene to offer help, but was turned away. He described the feelings associated with this rejection.

I thought, “Maybe there’s something I could do or maybe there’s some way I can make this—maybe I could be helpful for some reason.” [But when I got there,] I
felt like, “I shouldn’t be here. There’s nothing to do. And I’m just around people who saw a lot of people die, probably.” . . . One person said, “Dude, I don’t know what you’re doing here but we’re under attack here. So you can do what you want.” . . . I felt like, “You are so right; I’m not helping the situation.” I don’t know how I could help or what I could do, but no one asked me to help.

Ashamed, he trudged home. His reasonable appraisal of himself as someone who could assist suddenly seemed ill conceived and almost disgraceful. This description of a moment immediately following the disaster illustrates in a dramatic fashion the helplessness and ambivalence New Yorkers experienced as their efforts to participate in the recovery of their city and community were often frustrated.

Those few who were able to find an “official” way to participate described their efforts as being of minor value. One man, whose persistent efforts secured him a late-night volunteer shift, downplayed his role: “I didn’t do great stuff, just handed out sandwiches and water, mostly.” Those who were able to help also described their participation as both a duty and a privilege. One woman, a city social worker, said:

That first weekend [September 15–16], I worked at the Armory, at the Family Service Center. I was asked to. I had a prior engagement, of very important personal significance . . . but then I realized that was an indulgence. I had to do my part for the war effort, like in World War II when people made bandages. I was called to duty, and I had to go.

As these comments show, helping was very much a moral effort. Even attempts to help served as confirmation that an individual was a full participant in the community since people’s willingness for community participation far outstripped the supply of helping opportunities. This ongoing frustration of altruistic energy both contributed to and overlapped with an emergent public discourse that defined heroism and victimhood in particular ways. The rebirth of blue-collar heroism—in the character of firefighters, police, and construction workers—long eclipsed by celebrities, athletes, and ultra-rich entrepreneurs in modern American culture, introduced a redemptive angle to the attacks: our heroes would bring salvation and a return to America’s core values, such as bravery, hard work, and indominability. The new heroism also helped to locate the efforts of regular New Yorkers to participate in relief and bring about the end of the participatory aspect of the bystander condition. The relief effort was now dangerous and technical, and only work at Ground Zero counted as “honorable” or “real” aid. Ultimately, albeit subtly, the message that New Yorkers perceived was that help from “regular” New Yorkers was not needed (nor, in most cases, even wanted); the whole effort had become sacred and only consecrated helpers (heroes) could participate. Thus, most New Yorkers found themselves experiencing the frustration of desiring to help but being forced to watch from the sidelines like the rest of America.

The discourse of victimhood had a parallel development. Exemplified in the New York Times’ “Portraits of Grief,” those who died in the attacks came to occupy not their occupational categories, but the fundamental moral categories of our culture as fathers, sisters, wives, sons, and friends. To some degree, then, these individuals served as martyrs for American culture and values. We intend no cynicism in this description; the sacralization of this discourse continues to be powerful and moving. But it also served other functions in the post-September 11 culture. Constructing Ground Zero as sacred and its denizens
as sainted heroes put the site beyond the reach of regular New Yorkers, thus redirecting their efforts elsewhere. For example, a number of our respondents internalized the efforts of the community by engaging in moral or spiritual exercises of their own: reflecting on their lives or mending relationships with estranged friends and relatives in the wake of the attacks. One blog entry expressed a common sentiment: “This horrible event has shown me what truly matters. I will no longer worry about the things that don’t matter, and I will always make sure that the people I love know that I love them.”

With the opportunities for physical and psychological participation in the helping community severely limited, many bystanders embraced the moral route suggested by Giuliani, Bush, and other public figures. Beginning almost immediately after the attacks, Americans, especially New Yorkers, were repeatedly urged to conduct themselves in ways that would ensure that “the terrorists won’t win.” As the mayor declared in a press conference on the morning of September 12:

I think for the people in New York, the best way to deal with this tragedy right now is not only to deal with all their own grief, which we all feel and have, but to show that we’re not going to be in any way affected by this, that we’re not going to be cowed by this; that we’re not afraid. We are going to go about our business and lead normal lives and not let these cowards affect us in any way. (Giuliani, 2001)

Thus, the vast majority of New Yorkers who had been excluded from the privileged moral spaces of the disaster were assigned a task and space of their own: their own daily lives of work and play, production, consumption, and reproduction. Many took the maintenance of the economy seriously—some professors at New York University, near the World Trade Center site, even handed out cash to their students, entreating them to spread it around struggling downtown businesses. Most of our respondents also heeded the public calls in some way, seeing it as an opportunity to make themselves morally accountable to the community and the newly felt civic-minded content of the collective identity, “New Yorker.” For better or worse—and some respondents voiced vague discomfort with the arrangement even as they cooperated with it—the moral task of achieving normalcy through commerce and productivity simplified the problem and gave people a clear set of tasks and interpretations to which it was difficult to imagine alternatives.

The public discourse of heroism and victimhood was the terrain that perhaps most firmly established the liminality of New Yorkers’ experience. On the one hand, the attacks had happened in their city and the damage had been done to their community and lives. But at the same time, they could not in good conscience claim to be “victims” since the shock and disruption they faced could not compare to those who had lost life, loved ones, and property. Further, despite their proximity to and interests in the disaster, they were unable to do anything about it. Thus they found themselves caught in a series of middling positions. However, unlike in the cases of patriotism or commemoration, our respondents did not contest the definitions of heroism and victimhood because these categories, and the people they represented, were perhaps too morally saturated.
commemorating, and memorializing the dead was one such outlet for feeling a sense of belonging and support. Most of this activity was spontaneous and very much oriented to neighborhoods, with some more citywide commemorations occurring near Ground Zero. But as this temporary public sphere formed, how to participate became a moral problem for many New Yorkers.

Early on, both the disruption of normal routines and the desire for the newest information brought people together with friends and strangers. Since workplaces, schools, and other facilities were closed and transportation was severely limited, New Yorkers had little to do but stay at home where news reports, fraught with great anxiety and heart-wrenching stories of loss, became nearly irresistible. Gathering at neighborhood-based public spaces, such as Union Square and Washington Square Park, was one of the few options to escape the despair many described at feeling “glued to the TV,” while still respecting the somber mood blanketing much of the city. In the words of one “blogger”: “There was really no place else to be [other than at such public gatherings]. It was the only place to collectively mourn with the whole New York community.”

In these public gathering spaces, memorials and discussion forums blossomed. Creativity and tolerance characterized the interaction. Candlelight vigils were held at community centers and houses of worship. Posters of the missing accumulated on every free space, but particularly in public gathering spots such as plazas and parks. Fire stations were deluged in flowers, notes, and candles. People gathered to sing, cry, share artwork, record their thoughts, write messages, and pray together. Information was passed through word of mouth, a sign, or simply happening upon a crowd. In the first few days at least, when commerce and entertainment ground to a halt, there was little to draw people away from their own neighborhoods. All of lower Manhattan was off-limits, and help at the relief centers was not needed. Thus, memorialization served a very strong need, and also occurred very much at the community level.

Within a few days, there were citywide organized events for this type of solidarity seeking. But the focus of these events, large scale and organized, seemed more artificial for not being spontaneous. Notably, none of our respondents attended these official events. And in fact, a large event at Yankee Stadium on September 24 was only about one-third full (McFadden, 2001). Similar to the tensions inherent in the definitions of community and patriotism, official gestures created some dissonance with many New Yorkers’ experiences.

Within the memorial spaces, tensions developed around how to properly pay tribute to the event. Moral problems surrounded how to be respectful; for example, calls for war and peace presented a political dilemma. Some bystanders carried their cameras everywhere, while others felt this was disrespectful. As one respondent said: “It seemed like everyone was taking pictures, and it made me feel sick.” Further, while uncertainty about norms for behavior characterized commemorative interaction between individuals, New Yorkers also expressed dissatisfaction with the ways commemoration was being addressed by the media.

Rather than a unified, immediate, saddened reaction, in the early stages of grieving New Yorkers actively resisted certain images that were imposed on them by the media and expressed feelings that would likely have been seen as taboo by others. As one respondent complained:

The media need to focus not only on firefighters and NYPD who died, but on all the people who lost their loved ones. All they’re talking about, I mean, one would think
that it was a precinct or a fire station that got blown up. There were other people there.

The Ground Zero site itself also became a heavily symbolic setting used for photo-ops during the visits of politicians and dignitaries and a backdrop for news broadcasts. Once the site had been secured and the recovery and clean-up efforts were well organized, it quickly became an organized shrine and tourist attraction. The effect was that the site was alienated and abstracted for New Yorkers, not something they thought of as part of their experience. Some of our respondents voiced discomfort about visiting the smoldering site itself, and once it became such a focus of official drama and tourist pilgrimages, few of our respondents wished to visit it.

The desire to distinguish “real” New York commemoration from the spin that media organizations and official leaders imposed on it was especially clear with regard to the role that religion played in the community’s response to the disaster. In contrast to Oklahomans’ overwhelming reliance on religion in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing (Linenthal, 2001), our data indicate that many New Yorkers did not turn to organized religion to heal, despite television and media coverage that suggested the contrary. In the words of one respondent: “This is New York, you know. A few miles west, it’s all different. Bush is not a New Yorker, so you see [religious reaction] on TV but not here. They don’t pray here; they think about the money they need or have lost.” Another stated: “No one I know is religious; that’s not what New York is about. We have too many kinds of people here and too many other things going on. When I saw those [religious] services on TV, it didn’t do anything for me. That wasn’t where my heart was.”

NEGOTIATING THE NEW NORMAL: THE COLLAPSE OF LIMINALITY

Our respondents’ accounts of their social encounters show that previously taken-for-granted understanding of “community” and the norms for social interactions it entailed had to be dramatically renegotiated in the days and weeks after September 11. But even as New Yorkers were becoming accustomed to the new climate of interaction—that is, the proper measures of respect and intimacy that should be performed and expected—larger questions about what the future would hold for the fabric of social and psychic life needed to be addressed as well.

I’m wondering what the time scale is for when things will be roughly back to normal—not that I’m waiting—but it could be months. It’s sort of like being in a war. Things are different everywhere in the country. So when will things not be different for people? When will people be able to forget about it for just a day? It would be interesting to map how long it takes before you don’t notice it.

Indeed, the very conception of what was “normal” soon became a problem for New Yorkers as well; in time, it, too, became a subject of negotiations in daily interactions with both intimates and strangers. In fact, individuals’ negotiation of the various, aforementioned dilemmas inherent in their liminal condition necessarily involved the interrogation and definition of normalcy—what it meant, what had been lost, and how to achieve or reacquire it.

As the weeks and months passed, these tasks added up to the post-September 11 structure of feeling that exemplifies the “new normal.” In this period, New Yorkers began to
express some desire to move beyond a sense of disaster in which uncertainty and fear were ongoing. Many respondents expressed exhaustion at the constant state of “high alert” that the situation demanded, particularly in terms of social interaction and public/media attention. For them, returning to “normal” meant being able to live life without the constant reminder of September 11—or, at the very least, being able to achieve a relative placidity despite the periodic disruptions that would continue to threaten New Yorkers’ security and sense of community for months. Importantly, the strains and tensions that emerged around the issue of normality did not simply dissipate with time. Rather, the reconfiguration of norms described above presented enduring problems for New Yorkers regarding how to interact with each other and how to imagine themselves as a community; getting back to normal was a collective problem as much as it was a personal one.

The deeply felt desire to “get back to normal,” both collectively and individually, was manifested in many ways for months following the attacks. Importantly, however, it drew much of its particular energy from directives by official sources. The result was not so much a departure from the “authentic” and “diverse” voice of “the people,” but a symbolic organization of an “official” post-September 11 culture that exercised important political functions by affecting the structure of feeling embodied in New Yorkers’ practices and accounts. A specific and practical public meaning was attributed to “getting back to normal,” and this meaning was asserted as soon as possible after the attacks. Officials such as Bush and Giuliani entreated New Yorkers (and all Americans) to return to their regular lives in order to demonstrate that the terrorists had not “won.” However, at the same time, New Yorkers and all Americans were encouraged to dwell on the losses, to think about the lives of heroes and victims, and curse the terrorists, whose evil defied comprehension. More abstractly, citizens were enjoined to return to normal economic activities of production and consumption while giving leaders the right to extract revenge for collective suffering. The post-September 11 “norm of normalcy” asked Americans to cry only insofar as they could still return to economic activity; yet, conversely, they were not to allow their wounds to heal so much that the thirst for revenge would abate. Although getting back to normal for practical purposes, in the weeks and months following the disaster the frequent memorial services for different groups, daily coverage of the work at Ground Zero, messages from the front in Afghanistan, tragic personal stories, political speeches, and everyday conversation encouraged New Yorkers and all Americans to keep the emotional aspect of September 11 very much alive.

There was, of course, a coercive edge to this particular call for normalcy and the use of the powerful emotions and pronouncements. Many tensions of the times are captured in Bush’s famous line “you’re either with us or against us,” which was delivered as both a rallying cry and a warning to international allies and enemies alike. This call, which launched the rather abstract “war on terrorism,” also promoted the domestic arrangement of normalcy. For this purpose, the line might be translated as “you’re either with the government’s top-down interpretation of September 11 and what should be done about it, or you are against your neighbors, friends, and nation.” The Manichean calls of various official discourses all pointed toward settling or dispelling liminality or ambivalence in their listeners. They sought to establish moral and practical clarity in a situation that was in the daily experience of New Yorkers, and probably in more abstract ways for other Americans, highly complex, bewildering, and morally trying.22

This mismatch between the pronouncements of officialdom and the experiences of New Yorkers seemed to motivate various forms of resistance in the tasks of political sense

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making our respondents reported. This resistance came in many forms, including playing with meanings promulgated by officials and the defensive use of irony and humor. New Yorkers grappled particularly with the absolutes of an either/or choice and with the injunction to support political leaders that the scheme was structured to promote. To some respondents, the normal (economic) activities New Yorkers were asked to resume felt inappropriate. One respondent took almost a month to participate in economic life the way New Yorkers were asked to. For another, “doing something normal like a haircut was too much”; as an employee of a city agency, she felt the demand that people return to work a few days after September 11 to be a heavy burden. However, as she noted, “Giuliani wanted everyone back to work, though. And we had to go, just because he wanted us to [as city employees].”

Indeed, the various forms of resistance notwithstanding, the directives from official sources carried great weight. The inherent authority of official positions was further strengthened by the fact that the two leaders most important for New Yorkers—Mayor Rudy Giuliani and President George W. Bush—acted in ways that were deemed praiseworthy even by many who had previously been their detractors. In addition, many New Yorkers, despite their misgivings, had already aligned their actions and experiences with the moral tasks of “getting back to normal” that had been set out for them. Apart from those who claimed they had little problem with the government or its actions before September 11, many of our respondents voiced what might be considered “conversions” in their assessments of leaders of whom they had previously been skeptical.

Although I have my misgivings about going to war and I’m scared that we’re going to piss off other people and other countries, I think that everything [President Bush] has done so far has made me feel safer as an American. Yeah, pretty much. I’m surprised, but he seems to be pretty level headed about what is going on. I hated that he was “elected” [gestures mockery] and I didn’t think he had done anything right [before September 11], but to be honest I think he has handled the situation so far pretty well. He seems better now, stronger. Definitely it seems like he is trying to make us feel like we don’t have to be scared in our own country.

I’ve always been skeptical about police and the government. I have no trust in them and they make me nervous. But now I see how effective they are. These are honest, hardworking people, who are coming through when we most need it. It’s really made me take another look, to reevaluate my feelings.

In addition to these more abstract reassessments of support for political leaders, others found themselves coming to accept the framings of the crisis that they promulgated. As one respondent stated:

It’s weird because it didn’t feel like it was that big when that first plane hit and I saw it. And even when the second plane hit and I knew that it was terrorism and I heard the reports of the Washington, DC, thing. Even at that point it didn’t seem like the world-changing event. I don’t know why... I don’t know if it was because of the buildings falling and the scope of how many people were killed. I don’t think it was that. I think it was just... I don’t know. The first time Bush used the word “war” I was surprised. And I said, “This is not really war, like an active war.” But then he started to say we’re at war and I was “We’re at war, against who?” But now it really does feel like it was an act of war and I started to convince myself those planes are
bombs; it’s the same as bombing those buildings. In fact, it’s even more egregious because those bombs were loaded with people so yeah; I see that it’s war.

Ultimately, though many respondents expressed skepticism about the accuracy of information they received from news and political sources, most also said that they had little choice but to accept what they heard. Even those who maintained a more skeptical view of political responses to the crisis were often compelled to frame their accounts in the terms dominant in the public discourse at the time. This process was further encouraged because the outlets for “dissent” from the dominant framings of the event and norms of participation were few, unpublicized, and seemed scandalous (if not treacherous) in the new climate. As a result, interpretations of the situation that did not match official meanings were not granted public airing, let alone public validation; if they were voiced, they were limited to the private sphere or were framed solely in terms of personal experience. The inability to corroborate experiences that did not conform to the official narrative of events, in fact, proved very important. If respondents did not quite trust the political claims and interpretations promulgated by politicians and the media, they also had few discursive resources or alternate frames for establishing or rejecting this trust decisively. Thus, a common strategy in respondents’ narratives was accounting for the political future of America and the world fatalistically, as a fait d’accompli that they could not influence and for which they bore little or no responsibility. As one man reflected:

How do you ration [sic] with an enemy that you don’t know, that doesn’t want your land, doesn’t want your culture, just doesn’t want you to exist? How do you deal with, how do you have any kind of diplomatic approach with an enemy like this? I’ve tried to think this through. You know I like to believe that we did something that we can rectify, but I just don’t see how people who would do this can be reasoned with at this point . . . What are you gonna do, cut a deal with the devil? Cut a deal with a psychopath? You can’t do that. So the only chance you have is hope that you get ‘em all before they get us. I just don’t see what other solution there is. The government, they’re not going to pull out of the Middle East. They’re not going to change their position on Israel . . . Americans are not going to stop driving those stupid SUVs. And the oil companies are not going to allow other forms of energy to be developed. So you look at all those realities, what’s left? Kill or be killed.

For the most part, then, New Yorkers, and Americans more generally, actively and/or tacitly incorporated the dominant framings of September 11 and the functional configuration of normalcy promoted by public sources into their own accounts and practices regarding “getting back to normal.” As a result, many aspects of the structure of feeling prevailing in the fall of 2001—in particular the diverse and varied techniques people used to define and confront the abnormal conditions—have faded from memory, often to be inextricably linked with the more public framings, if they have survived at all.

Regardless of the sources that affected the definition of normalcy, the desire to return to normal was very strongly felt in the weeks and months following September 11. Many respondents began to tire of what sometimes seemed like endless memorialization of the events of that day, and of the preoccupation of the news and entertainment industries with the attacks and subsequent events related to them, of the pervasiveness of the symbols of “9/11.” Indeed, by the weekend following the attacks, it was impossible to live in New York City and not be inundated by sights that were quickly forming the “canon” of September 11.
symbols: a remarkable proliferation of American flags displayed in virtually every store window and, certainly, in almost every taxicab; the heroic images of firefighters, policemen, and other working-class heroes on whom the media lavished attention; numerous pictures and posters of the dead and missing lingering on lampposts and walls throughout the city; slogans scrawled on various surfaces, declaring New Yorkers’ strong spirit, boundless resolve, and, often, desire for revenge. This onslaught of images helped to cement 9/11 in the public consciousness as “an event like no other.”

Somewhat ironically, however, it was in the move to achieve normalcy that the tenuousness of New Yorkers’ cultural situation began to collapse; simultaneous to the situations that sustained bystanders’ liminality were the negotiations to end them and achieve normalcy. And, certainly, New Yorkers undertook various strategies for doing this. The vast majority of our respondents spent considerable portions of their interviews lamenting the loss of normalcy and the pleasures it affords, even questioning the possibility that we could ever enjoy that condition again. In so doing, they were crafting criteria for what normalcy is and how it might be achieved morally without violating the climate of mourning. Most described seeking settings where they could undertake the “work” of returning to normal. For most people, “returning to normal”—at least in the psychic sense of alleviating the discomfort of fear and constant preoccupation—had its foundation in the practical experience of resuming routines, such as returning to everyday activities like work and school. Performing their usual responsibilities, often quite literally in the theatrical sense of self-dramatizing or “going through the motions at work,” helped people show themselves and others ways of “being normal.” But, often, more compelling signs that “convinced” people they were making progress in a way that returning to the world of work, colleagues, and friends could not do came from things observed in the everyday, anonymous life of public spaces. As one respondent explained:

> I live on a hill, and it’s steep, and the kids race down on their bikes, and it’s steep, so they’re screaming doing it, and they do it at night, so there is this screaming, and that stopped [on September 11]. And two days later it started again, and I remember I was sitting on my balcony with two friends who were visiting and I hear this screaming again and I say to myself “okay, the kids have decided it’s okay to get back to life again.” It was a relief, it was a good feeling, actually, and no one had told them not to do it, they had decided themselves it wasn’t appropriate, and then, you know, they’re young, so they have to move on . . .

Seeing others enact or perform activities not related to September 11 thus provided important signs of and models for what normalcy was and could be. Importantly, however, the desire for normality was a complex issue, in part because abnormality—in particular the disruptions that New Yorkers presumed they experienced uniquely—had come to symbolize a special moral time and space and was an important element in the evolving structure of feeling. Abnormality symbolized the New York community’s solidarity with the victims of the attack who lost lives, loved ones, and property and with the rescue workers who toiled at Ground Zero. Bystanders’ discomfort was like a miniature version of the losses others experienced, and at the very least this discomfort was something that would be inappropriate to complain about without qualification for quite some time, given the magnitude of losses elsewhere. In the straightforward words of one respondent: “I hate to say that things are normal because of the victims.”
CONTESTING THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY

CONCLUSION

In noncrisis times, general labels like “New Yorker” can typically be used without their relative ambiguity becoming problematic for the community. However, in this time of crisis, when so much about conduct and interaction demanded reinterpretation, New Yorkers had to work hard to renegotiate the meaning of such a label. The ongoing reality of potential internal threats and the constant evaluation of the communal boundaries were motivating factors for New Yorkers to undertake this task in their interactions, and in many regards they were extraordinarily successful. Indeed, long after the attacks, there were still remnants of the feelings of solidarity and tolerance in the New York community and in the collective identity of New Yorkers. During this extended post-disaster period, irreverence and flippant remarks about the September 11 events were very much taboo in most circles within New York; though this period has now passed, the memory of the solidity that the community experienced has been woven into the identities of many New Yorkers and their expectations of what that identity means for others.

As we write these words, more than two years after September 11, 2001, differing views have again become part of the national public culture. This has been enabled by the way the contemporary configuration of normalcy has reduced September 11 from a totality to but one topic among many on the public and community agenda. There are some signs of diminishing contentment with this arrangement—due in no small part to reports of government mishandling of efforts to combat terrorism and using it to justify aggressive foreign actions—but, for the most part, the structure of feeling organizing normalcy, which apportions the public meaning of actions and opinions, proffers specific definitions of honor, victimhood, and public participation, and legitimates experts at the heads of decision-making bodies, still prevails today.

However, the discourse on September 11 has also opened up in a way such that now the event’s aftermath has entered a new phase of “normalcy,” refracting into a set of political, military, economic, and security problems. Whether September 11 is “merely a comma, a brief pause during which we looked up for a moment and then returned to our solitary pursuits,” as Putnam (2002, p. 20) wondered, is a question that will not be definitively answered for years to come. We argue, however, that both arguments connected to the decline-of-community thesis, that is, the argument that modern community in America is in decline, and the argument that September 11 has reversed the direction and strength of that decline, fail to capture a crucial feature of community.

Community is not either/or; rather, it is best conceptualized as a series of active and public negotiations that are constantly in flux. Although “community,” as it has come to be recognized in modern terms, typically emerges following disaster or crisis situations, its potential to emerge is always present. Thinking of community in this way offers a more fluid, adaptive way of conceptualizing its movement and potential, shifting the emphasis from the stagnant question of “Is community in decline?” to the more nuanced and pregnant questions “What are the features of ‘community’? In what kind of situations can we see ‘community’ at work? How can we be more inclusive and equitable within ‘communities’?” We can only hope that the solidarity, sensitivity, and collective intelligence that the New York community demonstrated as it negotiated a new, uncomfortable reality can find their way into the new world that seems to be upon us.
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Notes

1 The focuses of these books range widely, from castigating the government for failing to prevent 9/11 (Gertz, 2002; Miller and Stone, 2002) to detailing the personal lives and relationships of those killed in the attacks (Beamer, 2002; Longman, 2002; Stewart, 2002) to chronicling the tremendous proliferation of news coverage and visual images that inundated the culture in the wake of the attacks (CBS News, 2002; Lee, Schlein, and Levitas, 2002).

2 See Gillis (1994) for an examination of the struggle over public memory and national identity during the process of commemorating and defining history.

3 For example, we would argue that some varieties of patriotism emerged spontaneously in the afternoon of September 11, while variations of the phrase “Attack on America” or the numerous analogies to Pearl Harbor, both voiced by many, likely originated in the media.

4 This term has taken on a range of meanings, both before and after September 11. As early as one week after the disaster, White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe used it to describe the return to routine activities with new emphasis on certain public values and personal emotions (Associated Press, 2001). It has since been used to represent many aspects of the altered postdisaster condition; for example, it is commonly used in finance to represent the long-term sluggish economy (Earnshaw, 2003; LaBarre, 2003), while in the area of human rights it is interpreted as the loss of freedoms for particular groups and the weakening of the rule of law (Dworkin, 2002; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 2003). We use it to convey the period during which uncertainty waned and negotiation and boundary making faded from a near-constant activity to one that could once again be engaged less consciously, albeit on new terrain. That is, boundaries of community and issues of identity once again felt as if they had a more or less knowable basis for construction.

5 There is, however, a strand of disaster research that addresses “sense making” from an organizational perspective. Scholars who approach disaster from this perspective (Gephart, 1993; Kreps and Bosworth, 1994; Weick, 1993) are concerned with how corporations save face or repair their self-image after an accident. Their focus is on internal organizational culture and the way longstanding roles and norms of the corporation are used to repair a breach in the fabric of the organization.


7 The American tradition of disaster research is known for taking an “event perspective” (see Dynes, Billings, and Maggard, 1978; Kreps, 1984; Laska, 1989). The distinction we make is in the scale and the direction of the examination of the social context. The disaster literature overwhelmingly examines the social body at the institutional level, highlighting processes of organizational culture or of response and rescue procedures in response to an event. We differ by taking a broader view.

8 Such an approach was particularly popular in the United States, where a significant number of research agendas were (and are) funded by corporations and political parties who wanted to devise the most effective
advertising and public relations campaigns. Further, the empiricism inherent in this approach fit nicely with the empiricist tradition in the burgeoning social science of the period. The development of the limited-effects paradigm in this direction was, of course, in direct opposition to the concerns introduced and emphasized by the Frankfurt School.

9 Though currently very popular in media-effects research, some “new audience research” has been criticized as inadequate in that its celebratory approach to audience resistance comes at the expense of deeper sociological analysis (Garnham, 1997). Further, Curran (1996) criticizes the “discovery” of this emphasis, rightly noting that the idea that audiences perceive mass-communicated meanings differently is hardly new.

10 Snow and colleagues term this “frame transformation.” See Snow and Benford (1988) and Snow et al. (1986).

11 We speculate that preexisting social locations may be more relevant in relatively stable periods, while in periods of immediate crisis experiential realities such as the bystander condition emerge as more important.

12 The liminality of this position has been largely neglected in the sociological literature on disaster. One of the few studies that has examined the experience of bystanders, rather than victims, is Deutscher and New’s (1961) study of the latent functions of collective behavior in a disaster. Though their study does not address culture and meaning making, it categorizes some bystander responses, including a feeling of collective excitement and entertainment over novel circumstances, which they argue is maintained by a persistent sense of danger.

13 Similar reactions and attempts to establish identity and community were observed after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, particularly during the initial aftermath when the bombing was mistakenly assumed to be the work of foreign terrorists (Linenthal, 2001; Sturken, 2002).

14 Erikson (1976, 1994) documents a feeling of suspicion, heightened fear, or paranoia common among survivors of disaster for years afterward. He characterizes it as a stripping away of cultural “emotional insulation” once one has had a taste of disaster. He associates behaviors such as constant media monitoring and feelings of insecurity and fear as indicators of this phenomenon. Survivors, he claims, “evaluate the data of everyday life differently, read the signs differently, see patterns that the rest of us are for the most part spared” (1994, p. 153).

15 It is important to note that the terms “cosmopolitan” and “multicultural” here are used to signify the ethnic, racial, linguistic, and national diversity about which respondents commented and not to invoke the political and academic controversies that have surrounded those terms.

16 See Hart, Jarvis, and Lim (2002) and Schildkraut (2002) for further analysis of this effect.

17 Bodegas are small, locally owned and run convenience stores that operate throughout New York City.

18 We emphasize the symbolic dimensions of desires to help. Kendra and Wachtendorf (2003) discuss how “convergence,” the tendency of bystanders to gravitate toward disaster sites, was handled as a management problem of September 11 and other recovery efforts.

19 The controversy surrounding William Langewiesche’s American Ground (2002), an account of the recovery activities at the World Trade Center, demonstrates this sacralization. His book has been celebrated as refreshingly “realistic” for its multidimensional, sometimes fault-finding depiction of firefighters and others (Goldberg, 2002; Noah, 2002). But it has also spawned virulent and emotional attacks as well as two conflicting technical studies of the physical possibilities of the accounts of looting firefighters. The point is that firefighters and the World Trade Center have been so sanctified that any criticism will be taken by some as heretical. On similar episodes of symbolic heresy, see Dubin (2000).

20 In 2003, impassioned debate arose about whether to single out the rescue workers by their affiliations (e.g., NYPD) on the memorial that would built at Ground Zero, which had yet to be selected from over 13,000 submitted design proposals. Critics, including families of victims who were employed in the buildings, argued with a group of supporters, including police and fire department officials, over whether special designations would create a hierarchy elevating certain victims over others. It was resolved to include the affiliations.
21 In the words of one respondent, “I spent three days at hospitals, saying, ‘I’m O+!’”

22 Here we do not wish to imply that these words of Giuliani or Bush were conspiratorial or cynical bids for advancing their economic or political agendas, though many have made these claims since. Rather, we would argue that whatever their explicit motivations, their function was to serve these agendas. It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to explain why politicians chose these particular instructions to the public, but they clearly fall within the logic of governmental efforts to impose a version of rationality and legibility onto a potentially unruly social situation, as discussed extensively in Scott’s Seeing Like a State (1999).

23 One joke heard frequently in the weeks and months after September 11 mocked the idea that almost anything, especially excess, could now be excused by invoking resistance to terrorists: “If we don’t have this three-martini lunch, the terrorists will win!”

24 Schubert, Stewart, and Curran (2002) argue that this widespread approval was very much related to the heightened state of physiological arousal that most Americans experienced during the period immediately following the attacks. They argue that it was Bush’s brief speech on the evening of September 11 rather than his stronger, more critically lauded speech on September 20 that ensured the rally effect that would follow, because it was on the 11th that the public was most vulnerable and desperate for assurance that things would somehow be all right.

25 More than nine months after the attacks, the New York Times was still reporting reduced racial tension in New York City (see Murphy and Halbfinger, 2002).

References


