

American Dream or American Divide?: The American Dream as symbolic boundary

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Abstract

The American Dream is an idea that pervades American politics, media, history and culture. To explore the meaning and use of the American Dream, I engaged in analysis of qualitative interviews with 20 middle class Iowans. These Iowans conceptualize the American Dream as a life in which one works hard, gets an education, values family and de-emphasizes conspicuous consumption. Using these values of the American Dream to build a symbolic boundary, interviewees separate themselves from others who they perceive as not sharing these values. These values include an emphasis on self-motivated hard work and a middle class lifestyle without excessive spending and luxury. Middle class individuals draw on these values of the American Dream to form symbolic boundaries which differentiate themselves as harder workers than the lower class and less greedy and materialistic than the wealthy. These boundaries provide the middle class economic stability in a time of increasing downward mobility and a growing gap between the poor/middle class and upper class. Ultimately, the middle class uses the American Dream as a cultural narrative to reinforce their status and to reify social inequality.

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The American Dream is not totally dead, but, it's dying pretty fast. You look at the numbers on social mobility, on the ability of people to move from modest or poor background up, the United States is way down the list. I mean, Horatio Alger would move to Europe these days.¹

During an appearance on "Real Time with Bill Maher" in September of 2009, economist Paul Krugman described social mobility as less of a reality in the United States than ever before, saying the American Dream is dying.¹ His emphasis on the death of the American Dream reflects current doubts about the American Dream, particularly in the economic climate of the second half of 2009 to October 2011 in which the unemployment rate stayed above or at 9 percent, not counting those who have dropped out of the job search.² There has been increased media scrutiny around this concept, often highlighting doubt in the American Dream. According to a 2009 ABC News poll, 43 percent of Americans described the American Dream as "once true," but currently not true.³

Yet, instead of foretelling a post-American Dream America, people and media outlets often react to this questioning of the Dream with disgust, anger, and continued support of the Dream. Fox Nation, of Fox News, for example, described Krugman's comments as part of his "perpetually pessimistic view of America."⁴ This outcry shows that while there has been doubt about the Dream, particularly in the past few years with the economic recession, it still holds tremendous power. In fact, 50 percent of Americans in the ABC News Poll still believe in the American Dream.³ The Dream serves an important function, and remains dominant even in periods of economic downturn. The American Dream

then, is still a powerful idea in American culture. It can be likened to what Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar call a "cultural narrative," a set of beliefs or values which legitimates the "truth" of some social circumstance.⁵

Given this lasting power of the American Dream, I explore the function it serves in the lives of middle class Americans. These individuals draw distinctions between themselves and those who do not have the American Dream. I argue these distinctions allow the middle class to justify itself as better than others who are struggling in the economy and thus to position themselves as immune to contemporary economic forces. The distinctions also allow them to justify themselves as superior to the elite Americans who are gaining wealth at an accelerating rate.

Literature Review

Values of the American Dream: Individualism in an American meritocracy

The cultural values implicit in traditional narratives of the American Dream include beliefs in meritocracy and individualism. The phrase American Dream is the crystallization of these American cultural values dating back to the colonial era.⁶ In colonial America, the Protestant ethic supported the claim that America was a meritocracy, invoking hard work, a "methodical performance of duty" before God, as the way to achieve success.^{6,7} Individuals often believed that hard work was a sure method of moving from poverty to wealth, more commonly known as the path of "rags to riches."⁷ The belief that hard work was justly rewarded reflects the perception that America is a meritocracy. The definition of meritocracy, according to sociologists of social inequality Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller, is that, "If you work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. No matter where you start out in life, the sky is the limit. You can go as far as your talents and abilities can take you."⁸ Thus, individuals who subscribed to this ethic stressed meritocracy because they believed that hard work leads to success, no matter what obstacles appear, ignoring institutional biases and structural factors that foster success. This Protestant ethic fostered a belief in independence and self-sufficiency which would, along with meritocracy, later be secularized at the founding of the United States.

Secularization of the values of hard work and upward mobility led to an even more widespread culture of individualism and meritocracy. The secular emphasis on individual pursuit of success early in America's history is visible in the Declaration of Independence.⁶ This document reinforced the individual freedom of each person to work for one's own success, as each individual, according to the Declaration, had the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."⁶ Other examples of these values in American culture include "success books" which promised upward mobility through individual hard work. For example, stories written by Horatio Alger depicted poor boys who used hard work, frugality and prudence to become rich and powerful.⁷ These stories illustrate the American Dream that "anyone can get ahead," thus reinforcing an idea of American meritocracy.^{6,7}

After Alger's books and the distribution of "success" literature, the term American Dream was popularized formally. In his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams claims:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.⁹

Thus, Adams's use of the term was a crystallization of the previous American values of individualism, and upward mobility, emphasizing an America where every person can obtain his or her dreams and move upward based on individual ability, hard work and effort. The emphasis on attainment "regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" also reinforces the notion of equality of opportunity, which exists in a meritocracy. His use of the term recognized both the value of individualism, for its emphasis on individual capability (regardless of birth or position) and work for one's own, and also meritocracy, for its emphasis on a country where individual work would be rewarded regardless of family or social connection. These values of individualism and meritocracy would come to be the cornerstone of American culture in the years to come as the American Dream.

Values of individualism, hard work, and a belief in meritocracy form the foundation for contemporary cultural narratives of the American Dream. Foremost, there is still a focus on hard work as a quality that ensures that those who work hard and put forth the effort will be successful.^{8,10-14} The American Dream, founded on this ideology of meritocracy, portrays success and failure as deserved outcomes. In the American Dream, this ultimate goal is often a "middle class lifestyle" which is focused on a set of material goods and freedom from economic strife (i.e. having stable and secure resources).¹⁴ This lifestyle often includes the purchasing of a home and a college education.^{15,16} Through meritocracy and individualism, the current means of achieving this lifestyle and thus the American Dream includes both education and the value of hard work. In the American Dream, this individual hard work is the path to a "middle class" lifestyle which evolved from the belief in general upward mobility in the twentieth century.

The post-World War II economic boom, fueled in part by the GI Bill, created an idealized focus on moving upward to a particular middle-income status.^{6,15} Cassidy notes that the American Dream as a "middle class" status can be vague because the definition of the middle class is vague.¹⁵ The most agreed upon facets of middle class lifestyle include the money to purchase a college education, own a home, get health care, put "food on the table" and have some money left over for leisure spending.^{8,12,16} This idea of the American Dream as "middle class" also impacts family as an important institution for the performance of the Dream.

Individuals often use family to pass on the values of the American Dream, individualism and hard work, while also providing the middle class lifestyle that characterizes the American Dream.^{8,10,12,13,17,18} Newman describes the family as a place where the value of hard work and meritocracy must be proven; those parents who do not live a "normal," middle class lifestyle or who become downwardly mobile are an embarrassment to their

partners and children.^{12,13} Thus, family is important because the American Dream prescribes a certain appearance of family, based on a middle class lifestyle. Although people see the Dream as holding symbolic power in America today, the economic climate of the past two decades has been particularly threatening to an individual's economic stability, the chance of upward mobility, middle class lifestyles and hard work's connection to success.

While the ideology of the American Dream suggests anyone can succeed by relying solely on themselves and hard work, the reality of success often contradicts this belief. Newman argues that downward mobility, rather than upward mobility, has been an increasing reality for millions of middle and working class Americans.^{12,13} Downward mobility and rising costs have jeopardized individuals' middle class status and thus, their chance at achieving the American Dream.^{12,13} This economic stagnation for the middle class is compounded by the increasing wealth of the upper class which then elevates what is seen as the ideal middle class income and lifestyle.

While recent economic developments in America may make the American Dream less attainable than ever before, its power as a cultural narrative still remains. I argue that the Dream still remains powerful because middle class Americans are still able to use it to create status for themselves, while denying this status to others. Americans use components of the American Dream based in its values to distinguish themselves, masking the economic reality of downward mobility of many and the rapidly increasing wealth of few.

Symbolic boundaries

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual divisions which serve two purposes: to both create identity and to justify inequalities and social hierarchies.⁵ Cultural sociologist Michele Lamont's research finds that working class individuals have used boundaries to create and reinforce an identity as working class.¹⁹ Similarly, individuals may use the American Dream to reinforce identities about themselves as separate from others. This separation aids in the formation of identity, as individuals using the boundary to define themselves in a certain way, while labeling groups of people as outside from or different from their identity.⁵

Symbolic boundaries are also distinctions individuals make which morally separate themselves from others.⁵ A cultural narrative like the American Dream is part of a broad cultural context which provides ample material for the formation of symbolic boundaries.⁵ There are components of the Dream that individuals identify, based in the values of meritocracy and individualism, which are used as symbolic boundaries. These distinctions also justify social hierarchies as individuals who use boundaries to define their own identities as superior to other people who they perceive as being unlike themselves.⁵ These distinctions justify inequality and class hierarchy by distinguishing people's failures as their own responsibility.

My work is influenced by this research on symbolic boundaries and in particular Lamont's studies which explore class inequalities. By relying on this basis of research, I am narrowing my focus to class distinctions and their connection to the American Dream. This is not to say that other distinctions such as racial, ethnic, religious, and gender might not be of importance to the ideology of the American Dream. Rather, I am narrowing my focus to a manageable level for this research endeavor. I argue that middle class individuals use components of the American Dream as boundaries which aids in their identity formation as hard working, middle class citizens. This boundary work justifies a middle class superiority, as the middle class "us" in my research proclaims it has

achieved the American Dream, while also identifying the upper and lower-class “them” as lacking the Dream. The symbolic meaning of hard work creates an identity of the middle class as hard workers, and the lower class as lazy. These identifications then justify the lower class’s economic deprivation. The boundary of the “comfortable” middle class lifestyle identifies the upper class as greedy and superficial, allowing the middle class to avoid trying to catch up to the increasing consumption levels of the wealthiest Americans.

Methods

In order to determine how individuals both define and use the American Dream, I analyzed 16 interviews, each with an individual Iowan, and two interviews with Iowan married couples from across five different cities in Eastern and Central Iowa. Respondents were drawn from my own work associates and from social contacts of my academic advisor, Professor Tori Barnes-Brus. I also employed snowball sampling to find more Iowans to interview. This sample comprised white, middle class Iowans. The median household yearly income range is \$40,000-\$60,000. Since the U.S. Census Bureau reported national median yearly household income in 2010 to be \$49,445, this sample represents a very middle income group of people.²⁰

Most respondents have jobs that I would classify within the field of “professionals” such as doctors, teachers, nurses, professors and consultants. None of the respondents are currently working in manual labor. All of the respondents have at least some college education and most have completed at least an undergraduate level of education. The level of education reflects upward social mobility for many of the respondents, as nine respondents reported parents whose highest education was high school or lower. Jobs of the respondents’ parents are more diverse in their range than in respondents’ jobs, with more working class professions included such as farmers, factory workers, machinists and painters. Of the respondents, 15 were female and five were male. Six of the respondents were divorced, separated or widowed, one unmarried and 13 were married. Nineteen out of the 20 respondents had at least one child.

The interviews lasted an hour to two hours, with the average being approximately one hour and fifteen minutes long. Before each interview, respondents each read and signed an informed consent form. This form included details of the study, notice of audio-recording, and a notice that participants could refuse to answer any questions they did not want to answer and could withdraw from the interview at any time. Additionally, the form included an explanation that data could possibly be shared at conferences and in journals, but personal identities would remain strictly confidential. The interviews were semi-structured and opened with general questions about the American Dream, and then moved towards a respondent’s thoughts about “rags to riches”, “keeping up with the Joneses” and success, closing with questions about economic difference and social class. As the interviewer, I prompted respondents for more detailed answers or clarification and allowed them to deviate from the schedule in order to explain their ideas about the American Dream. After the interview, respondents completed a short written survey composed of demographic questions about their income, age, family, job and community involvement.

I transcribed each interview and analyzed the transcripts for common themes. I coded each complete interview with a code number that corresponded to interviewee’s actual names. To analyze the interviews, I used different colored highlighting and underlining in Microsoft Word to code different themes that repeat-

ed multiple times throughout the transcripts. I started with 28 concepts, which I narrowed to the most relevant and numerous categories. I found that every interview included mention of hard work, as well as mention of the proper income level, compared to greed. Additionally, 16 of the 18 interviews included references to education. Less cited concepts like “having a house,” and “having the right attitude” fit into the notions of “comfortable” (rather than greedy) and “hard work” that were dominant themes of the interviews. Another concept, where the components and boundaries of the dream seemed relevant to, the family, was cited in 16 out of 18 interviews. Later, I used a random name generator which drew on names from the U.S. Census to assign pseudonyms for each respondent.

Analysis

Values of the American Dream

Respondents described the American Dream by relying on cultural values of individualism and an ideology of meritocracy, similar to how previous researchers have described the American Dream.^{6-8,12,14} Respondents rely on these values in explaining important aspects of the American Dream, which include education, hard work, and emphasis on the achievement of a “comfortable” lifestyle and income level. Respondents also declare that family is an important display of these particular aspects of the Dream. My respondents describe family as important to these values and thus the American Dream as they use the appearance of family to measure themselves as individually responsible hard workers and as successful agents in America’s meritocracy.^{10,12,13} Family acts as the location where values of hard work, education, community and individualism come to be transmitted to future generations. One respondent, Joe Bowers, for example, describes how the value of education, part of the American Dream to him and many other respondents, was transmitted through his family. He explains:

I think actually my own life has been a pretty good example of the American Dream because I came out of a family in Texas, my dad was a doctor, my mom was a housewife. And the expectation, he was the first person that ever went to college and the expectation was that I would go to college...

Joe’s recollection of his family’s expectations for him reflects how American education, particularly higher education is an important path to “living the American Dream”, by gaining the skills necessary to find a job, be successful and to gain an income to raise a family.^{6,12-14} This aligns with a path towards self-reliance and individualism. Americans value education because of the perception that it provides the equality of opportunity necessary for all to succeed.¹⁸ I argue that family is an institution where this important pathway to the American Dream is emphasized. While he ignored his parents’ will on career choice, Joe notes the importance of family in that his parents transmitted the values of hard work and self-reliance that were necessary for him to succeed both in higher education and beyond.

The value of education as emphasized in the institution of the family is also explained by Helen Berry. When asked where her ideas of the American Dream came from, she responds”

I think that they [ideas about the American Dream] come out of your family, they come out of education a lot, you know, that’s why I’m sure a believer in education, they come out of how you can better yourself. Education will help you. I mean I worked for a lady one time, just helped her in her house,

it was a grandma that was raising her grandkids when their mother died and she used to, every Saturday, every Saturday for probably two years of my life she would say to me, ok no Helen, just get an education because they can't take that away from you. You can take everything else away from you but you cannot take an education away from you.

Helen's thoughts on education reflect how McNamee and Miller describe it as an important part of the American Dream because it represents a path to upward mobility, central to the notions of meritocracy in the United States.⁸ The American Dream is often shaped to fit a simple model of meritocracy and upward mobility, as respondents explain if a person gets an education, and then makes the most of that knowledge through hard work and perseverance, he or she cannot possibly fail. The American Dream, a set of values which does not take into account structural causes of poverty or downward mobility, is reflected in how interviewees discuss education as the path to the Dream. Family becomes an important background to this and other cultural values of the American Dream.

Emphasis on education as a process which ensures and creates a meritocracy is not the only value of the American Dream that is central in the institution of family. I argue, using these interviews, that values about individual responsibility, hard work and motivation, also central to notions of meritocracy, are also transmitted through family. Rosetta describes how family works to transmit these values, from parents to children. For her:

It's raising your children to be a good person, know right from wrong and do unto others as you would have others do unto you, that's, you know, always looking out for other people and, thinking about how they would feel if you, how you would feel in their situation, ... just being responsible, being accountable for your actions, being... caring and... available to the people that need you. And being motivated, you know, being, not to be a lazy person, to be somebody that is a doer...

The values Rosetta speaks about her family reinforcing correspond with values that are central to the American Dream: individual responsibility, accountability, motivation and hard work. By emphasizing these as some of the most important values of family, Rosetta describes the family as an institution which "teaches" the American Dream to the next generation of Americans. Just as McNamee and Miller argue, hard work is a value which reinforces the notion of meritocracy, and validates success as a product of one's own labor and failure as a product of one's own ineptitude or laziness.⁸

Arnez Parunski's recounting of her father's advice to her reinforces the cultural value of hard work as a part of the American Dream, and its connection to success. As her father emphasized to her:

Nobody's just going to give it to you for free kid, and nobody ever said it was going to be easy. Nobody's ever going to say it was easy, but if you keep your nose to the grindstone and you're honest and you're forthright, it can all come to you, so I think it is part of it.

Here Arnez is reinforcing the idea that one must be prepared for hard work and this must come from oneself, and not from others. This further strengthening of individualism and personal responsibility, as this hard work comes out of a place of individual motivation, rather than social regulation or force that might re-

quire hard work of an individual. This reinforcement of personal labor and individual responsibility casts individuals as responsible for their own failures or successes and justifies both successes and failures within the ideology of meritocracy that is part of the American Dream.

Respondents describe motivation and hard work as the path to the "comfortable," middle-class lifestyle that is part of the American Dream. The rise of the middle class in the years since World War II have led to the standard level of middle-class consumption which as defined by sociologist Fred Block includes a car, a house, health care and education.²¹ Bridgette Marcinko describes the American Dream in these terms of financial necessity and a comfortable lifestyle that includes necessities such as a safe house, food and medical care. She claims:

[T]he American Dream to me is owning, having a house, having *financial security*, feeling safe in your home, being happy in your home. That sort of thing. ...[Y]ou know, um, not necessarily millions of dollars, but being *comfortable* where you don't have to worry about, are you going to be able to feed your family. Are you going to be able to pay your bills and still get medical care? And not being afraid, not being afraid of leaving your windows open at night, you know, just feeling safe in your own home and being able to provide for your family.

The "comfortable" lifestyle Bridgette describes aligns with how these middle-class individuals see themselves. As the necessities of the "comfortable" lifestyle align with the research of what it means to be "middle class," "comfortable" equates to the status of a middle-class lifestyle. Respondents claim that this "comfortable" lifestyle includes the necessities, without extravagance or luxuries. This lifestyle then, based on the way it is described by respondents, is an essential part of the American Dream. The lifestyle is an end goal of the Dream, as a result of the hard work and effort that are emphasized as American cultural values. Thus, the "comfortable" and notably middle-class lifestyle is a marker of whether one has worked hard and to the best of one's ability and talents, consistent with the ideal of meritocracy.

Despite emphasis on family, the facets of hard work, motivation, education and a comfortable lifestyle are based in individualism.⁸ All of these components are demonstrated as individual actions or motivations. For example, hard work is described as individual effort and work completed in cooperation with a group or a community is rarely mentioned by the respondents. Education is also individually sought, as the interviewees talked about having a love of learning and doing well in school because they desired to go to college and do well there. Income for a comfortable lifestyle is awarded based on one's own work ethic and skill in a job. Parents have an individual responsibility to provide material goods for children and to instill ethics and values into their children. Thus, whether or not individuals reach the American Dream greatly depends on their own effort and performance. These thoughts confirm the existence of the belief in meritocracy where an individual is rewarded with success based on their own individual effort and skill.⁸

While respondents stressed that their understanding of the American Dream was their own individual definition, they ultimately shared the similar narrative of the Dream. The common description of the Dream, which explained importance of education, self motivation, a "comfortable lifestyle" and family, illustrates that there are shared cultural and social contexts that these individuals exist within. All live in the United States, which values

meritocracy and individualism.^{8,10,18} Additionally, respondents are middle-class individuals who have families. Their social context conditions them to respond similarly when asked the same questions. Further, I argue that respondents draw on this collective context, including the American Dream as cultural narrative, to build symbolic boundaries. Since most respondents described the same facets of the Dream and live with similar experiences in income and culture, they are able to build a common identity, defining others who transgress that identity as outside of the Dream. Creating these symbolic boundaries allows individuals to maintain status while under threat from both increasing extravagance of the elite and the increasing downward mobility of the middle class.^{13,22}

American Dream as symbolic boundary

The American Dream as a cultural narrative, with its emphasis on individual effort and America as a meritocracy, is drawn on to create symbolic boundaries. Since the Dream is so important to American culture, the emphasis on work ethic and a “comfortable” lifestyle are used by individuals as symbolic boundaries. My respondents articulated these boundaries in ways that aligned with general class divisions. While not everyone in my interviews claimed that all had the absolute ability to have the American Dream, many explained that most Americans could reach the Dream if they only had the correct goals and values (financial stability and hard work, for example). Therefore, in this Dream, most anyone can succeed, and failure is due to a failure to have the right goals, which is again, a reflection of the values of meritocracy and individualism in America.

Since this sample was mostly middle-income and identified as middle class, the significance of these boundaries is even more apparent. These respondents, as middle income Iowans, are lacking the privilege of the large incomes that members of the upper-middle class have. In a country that valorizes money, average Americans are attempting to gain status despite lack of a high income. By challenging the class hierarchies with their own symbolic boundaries which draw on the American Dream, Americans are able to define themselves as happy and fulfilled in a culture that often emphasizes consumerism and money. People use the American Dream to defend their position as desirable. They claim they will not become poor or downwardly mobile because they are insulated by their work ethic (which they claim the poor or downwardly mobile often lack) and do not wish to enter into the realm of the increasingly wealthy because such a status is “greedy” or “materialistic.” By drawing boundaries that define themselves as achieving the American Dream, they create moral boundaries that privilege a middle-income lifestyle over a poor or upper-income lifestyle, even amidst great economic turmoil and tension of the American reality versus the American Dream.

Iowans defend their status as middle class, financially secure and thus part of the American Dream by defining themselves against others who are struggling or poor. Stuart Rudolf uses the value of hard work to create a symbolic boundary between himself, a self-labeled “hard worker” and others of the “dependency class” who don’t work hard enough and thus are unworthy of and denied the American Dream. Stuart says:

Well, you know, a household in poverty with dysfunctional parents and drugs and alcohol and abuse and this is rife in your neighborhood and all your peers are the same. But it doesn’t have to be that gross. And moving up a step, people in the...dependency environment...it might be their American Dream to get welfare for the rest of their life, but I wouldn’t...

to me that’s not the American Dream. But there’s a certain welfare mentality.

By classifying a family that aims to achieve or gain welfare benefits for a lifetime as dependent, Stuart shows how many lower-income individuals do not fit into the values of individualism which underlie the American Dream’s components. Instead of working hard by oneself to provide for a family, instill values in children, and pay for education, these parents are perceived as lazy and dependent. Since Stuart and others rarely mention cases of the lower class as victims of structural factors, they allow their categorization of the lower class as dependent to become front and center of their personal narratives. By defining this group of people as lazy, dependent and lacking the value of hard work that underlies the American Dream, respondents are able to explain why they will keep their middle-class status in this economic unrest. They explain themselves as hard workers while explaining away why others, no matter how good economic conditions are, will always be stuck with low wages and living on government benefits.

Arnez Paranuski is another person who decries a group of individuals for choosing not to work. She argues:

And then you have the other set. That’s you know, the welfare to work moms and dads that are trying to do that job, but they just go for the welfare, you know and they really are sucking the system dry and then you have illegal immigration that are sucking entitlement programs dry. Sucking them dry!

Here, Arnez is describing certain people as dependent and lazy. Instead of depending on their own hard work, they depend on a “system” to take care of their needs and provide them with a sufficient lifestyle. As such, individuals who receive government benefits do not achieve the American Dream, as they do not sufficiently value hard work and thus do not rely on the value of individualism in a meritocracy. Respondents are using this distinction to create a hierarchy that provides them status as “Dream” realizers, denying that status to others, characterizing them as unwilling to make the strides necessary to reach the cultural values of the Dream.

Respondents use achievement of the “comfortable” and middle-class lifestyle as a boundary. This lifestyle becomes evidence of their achievement of the American Dream. Respondents construct this boundary to privilege themselves as having the American Dream and the upper class as not having the Dream. This boundary between the upper class and the middle class is focused on the consumerism of current American culture. Since the “comfortable,” middle-class lifestyle is valued in the American Dream, respondents define their own income and consumption level as desirable and morally superior, and that of those with more money as undesirable, both greedy and materialistic. Here Jimmy Lyons describes that there are negative outcomes to being rich and that he only wants things that fit into the level of “comfortable.” He explains:

I don’t need to be rich, you know, just comfortable. I’ve always thought that. I’d rather be comfortable than rich because it’s like to me, the more money you have, the more problems you have and the more people, more people want from you and the more people expect you to give this and that and the other. So, if I’m, if I have a job and I can support my family and I don’t have to worry about, um, you know being evicted or my lights going off or my heat or my water, any of that going off, then I mean that’s a comfortable living to me if I can afford to provide for my family plus provide clothing, food, the basics.

Jimmy's emphasis on necessities is echoed by others. Jimmy defines the rich as having their own set of problems based on the amount of money they have. This allows Jimmy and others like him to ignore the differences in lifestyle caused by increasing spending or increasing wealth of the upper class. This contrasts to what economist Robert Frank finds which is the middle class attempts to "catch up" to the increasing living standards of the rich.²² Instead, by defining anything above the "comfortable" lifestyle as greedy and materialistic, middle-class Iowans deny any positives of a higher income and more spending, cementing their status as better than those with more money. This separation of a middle-class lifestyle from the rich lifestyle reshapes the hierarchy so that the American middle class can consider themselves as better both than lower-class individuals and upper-class individuals.

The use of a symbolic boundary between the middle-class "us" and the upper-class "them" occurs in a period where most of the respondents see Americans as becoming increasingly materialistic and interested in consumption of luxuries. In order to maintain their status, even while not pursuing the latest luxuries, respondents use the boundary to define these others not just as wealthier, but rather as greedy and materialistic. Karina Davis cites an example of the "Joneses" that illustrates her contempt for those who use are buying the latest technologies for the sake of buying alone, and not to meet the needs of a "comfortable" lifestyle. She describes the Joneses as "greedy." She, on the other hand describes herself as only wanting things that are "really beneficial," rather than anything that is just a desire. Here again, the middle-class lifestyle is cast as better than upper-class, based on the way in which the upper class spends money. People who are wealthier are cast as lacking focus on the "simple" things that are necessary to the "comfortable lifestyle," including food, housing, and health care. Instead, members of the upper class are transgressing middle-class values and lifestyle by being "greedy" and focusing on luxuries. By focusing on the wealthy as greedy and materialistic, the rich are cast as outside of the American Dream, as they seek more than what is the "comfortable" middle-class lifestyle.

In another interview, Cornelius and Pearl Quinn also decry people who spend extravagantly, holding those people as separate from their own saving and spending methods:

Cornelius: It bugs me when I see...people...um...living...

Pearl: Beyond their means?

C: Living better than me...superficially anyway. Living better than me and me surmising that...um...they can't afford it. You know. And how is it then that...For example, when our children were really little, we had a nanny so we could get some work done. We knew how much we were paying the nanny and...how she was living seemed beyond that. And uh, she wasn't living it, she was living...was she living with her parents at the time?

P: Yeah.

C: And she, that family... you know, their Christmas gifts were way out of line with what we had expectations for, for spending for Christmas. Stuff like that. And...I don't know, I think. What bugs me is people...going bankrupt after spending uncontrollably.

By talking about people going bankrupt or spending beyond their means, Cornelius and Pearl form an identity for themselves as those who spend just enough to be "comfortable" and to save the rest, and for others, who they perceive to spend lots of money on luxuries. This focuses not only on those who are wealthy but those middle-class peers who spend "uncontrollably" on unneces-

sary and unaffordable luxuries. In this way, these individuals are cast as crossing a boundary of the respectable meaning of money and wealth, attempting to pretend they have immense wealth, when in fact they do not have the wealth and income to support their lifestyle. This outrage shows regulation of those who achieve the Dream (the middle class, focused on living at simply a level of "comfort"), and those who do not (those whose use of money transcends "comfort" to spend on luxuries, both wealthy and wealthy-pretenders). This symbolic boundary is used to reorder the social hierarchy and create status for oneself as a middle-class individual who achieves the American Dream.

This focus on both wealth and middle-class peers who spend "too much" reinforces the stability of identity and status between the boundary of the "comfortable" and the "middle class." Respondents' use of this boundary to distinguish themselves from middle-class peers shows that they emphasize rejection of keeping up with the Joneses. Using this boundary, they not only create stability given the downward mobility of some but given the increasing wealth of others. By maintaining a certain level of status and income, they defend themselves against the need to "catch up" to the increasing wealth of upper-class Americans. By doing so, they cast their middle-class peers who are big spenders as outside the American Dream, identifying a group of middle-class individuals who are somehow more true to the "comfortable" level of the American Dream than consumerist and greedy peers.

Respondents use the cultural narrative of the American Dream, which includes their belief in individual effort and hard work, and the resulting achievement of the "comfortable" middle-class lifestyle, to build symbolic boundaries which divide the middle class from both people in the lower-class and those in the upper-class. These boundaries function to maintain class status for middle-class Iowans, even while others around them lose income and wealth due to the economic downturn and as the wealthy maintain their income levels. With changing economic conditions and less income and job security than before, middle-class Iowans use the American Dream to prove their immunity from these forces while also explaining why these forces exist. They explain the economic failures as mostly a result of laziness or a dependence mentality, and explain the increasing wealth of the rich as unimportant to the American Dream and to morality.

Discussion/Conclusion

My research builds on past discussion of the American Dream by confirming its central tenets through qualitative interviews with Iowans. I argue that these respondents show how the American Dream today is still composed of the core cultural values of individualism and a belief in meritocracy. These values, crystallized in the American Dream, are used to discuss the importance of education, hard work, obtaining the middle-class "comfortable" lifestyle and the use of family to transmit these American cultural values. These values and their repetition across most interviews show the common cultural fabric of the American Dream that each individual draws from.

Relying on Lamont's exploration of "symbolic boundaries," I argue that the American Dream operates, then, as this common cultural narrative for the purposes of creating "symbolic boundaries" which are used to form an identity and maintain status. Drawing on the American Dream, middle-class Iowans describe themselves as harder working, independent and motivated than the lower class below them. By using this boundary, they are reconciling the values of the American Dream, namely its emphasis on America as a meritocracy, with the modern reality of downward mobility. Thus, these middle-class respondents are able to

claim that those who are in poverty, lacking economic resources, or those who have moved downward in income and class status are merely feeling the results of their own actions. The poor are cast as lazy and dependent; it is this laziness and dependence which justifies their lack of income and low status. The perceptions of laziness of the poor justifies their inequality relative to the middle class, while also providing comfort to the middle class that they are immune to economic forces that may render them poor or downwardly mobile.

Additionally, my research shows that Iowans create a symbolic boundary between themselves and upper-class individuals, which focuses on the “comfortable” income level and lifestyle. They define the wealthy as outside of the American Dream because they are “greedy” and want more than is necessary to have the American Dream, more than the necessities of food, housing, and health care. By using a boundary to separate themselves from the wealthy, middle-class Iowans secure their place as “comfortable” and thus achieving the American Dream, labeling the wealthy as outside of the Dream. This also means that members of the American middle class deny the significance of income inequality between themselves and the rich, as those who are wealthier lack the emphasis on “comfort” and morality and are instead construed as greedy. This allows the middle class to construct themselves as superior to the rich, even as the rich’s assets and income grow at a rate faster than the American middle class, as Frank and Perrucci and Wysong explain.^{14,22}

The use of symbolic boundaries based on the cultural narrative of the American Dream as I’ve described has the potential to impact public policy. Their use justifies inequality of the lower class relative to the middle class, as they are constructed as working less hard and thus being less deserving of the comfortable income and lifestyle of the American Dream. Thus, it is possible that such attitudes may be used to justify the elimination or decrease of social welfare programs which aim to provide a better standard of living to the poor. On the other hand, the boundary which separates the middle from the upper class seems to downplay the impact or importance of that inequality. This boundary leads the American middle class to believe that they do not want to be in a position of greater wealth, as such a position does not merit achievement of the American Dream. Therefore, with that boundary, inequality is downplayed or reinterpreted in a way that does not merit policy changes. It seems then, that by emphasizing the inequality between the middle class and the poor as justified, and the inequality between the middle class and the rich as insignificant or without impact, Americans can justify a “do-nothing” government, which, while cutting off aid to the poor, also does nothing to lessen the gap between the wealthy and the middle class.

This research of the American Dream is very specifically focused on middle-class individuals with families and who are mostly white. Further inquiry should examine how the lower class, especially given their own economic deprivation, rejects or accepts the American Dream, and if accepted, how that is justified with their own lived experience of downward mobility or static mobility and low income. Another focus may be on how race might alter the cultural narrative of the American Dream, both in its definition and its use. Additionally, gender is another component that could be explored, particularly how changing gender roles and sex discrimination in the workplace interacts with the American Dream.

In conclusion, these middle-class Iowans rely on the cultural values of individualism, and meritocracy to define the American Dream. In doing so, they describe their family as a necessary background for the achievement of the American Dream, as it becomes an institution where the values of education, self-motivation and hard work necessary to meritocracy are transmitted. Additionally, family becomes a location for the performance of the “comfortable” lifestyle that is the result of individual hard work in the American Dream. The American Dream, defined by these values, is used to create symbolic boundaries which separate these middle-class Iowans from both the lower and upper class. The American Dream is a tool for these respondents to acquire status and make meaning of other people, defining themselves as superior as and better than both the lower and upper class. This tool is not used without consequences, as it can affect policy making and thus, distribution of resources. By understanding the meaning Iowans make of the American Dream and the divisions between those who have this Dream and those who do not, researchers can understand the potential consequences in American culture and politics, particularly in public policy affecting the distribution of wealth.

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