Unity and Diversity in American Political Culture: An Exploratory Study of the National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity

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Drawing on participant observation and quantitative analysis, this paper investigates the National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, a series of local conversation projects organized by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1995 and 1996. After linking this program to debates about American political culture, the paper analyzes the observational and survey data in light of five hypotheses about the conversations. The conversations reveal fundamental, unresolved dilemmas regarding the compatibility between American identity and ethnic pluralism, although the participants sometimes cope with these dilemmas in culturally creative ways.

KEY WORDS: discourse; political culture; race.

In November 1993 Sheldon Hackney, then chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, introduced an NEH-sponsored program called the National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity. Such a Conversation was needed, according to Hackney (1993), because political cynicism, economic insecurity, uncertainty over the role of the United States in foreign affairs, the destruction of the “cultural consensus of the 1950s,” and the politics of difference are “battering a society whose bonds of social cohesion have been loosening for a quarter of a century or more.” These developments have had an “atomizing effect on society,” and a National Conversation could help to reverse this trend by
focusing attention on the values that we share and that unite us as a people: “We have been paying too much attention to our differences and not enough attention to the things that hold us together.” A conversation in which all voices are heard would help to counter this tendency, “build toward agreement,” develop a “new consensus,” and “recapture a confident sense of shared values that will let us then deal with divisive public policy issues with a common goal in mind.” Hackney hoped the Conversation would uncover an American identity distinct from, yet inclusive of, specific ethnic and racial identities. To Hackney, this American identity is based on the political values embedded in the Constitution, trust in our political system, belief in equal opportunity, and a common (if imperfect) history.

To further these goals, NEH spent $5 million to sponsor approximately 70 conversation projects held around the country in community centers, public libraries, colleges, museums, and private residences. Hackney’s (1994) intention was to “create a public sphere in which Americans can discuss serious questions affecting national life.” According to Hackney, the “‘public sphere’ in America doesn’t exist in the way it should. We don’t have a village square anymore where people could come to talk to each other about common problems” (Feinsilber, 1994). Hackney hoped the Conversation would help people to rediscover the responsibilities of citizenship, to “think of the common obligation we have to each other,” and to blend particular interests together into the higher interests of the whole (Stimpson, 1994a).

Immediately upon announcing the NEH’s National Conversation, Hackney faced criticism. From the political right, George Will (1994, 1995) argued not only that we already have a “surplus” of talk about diversity, but also that the guidelines in the NEH’s conversation kit were too controlling and paternalistic, and would surely capitulate to multiculturalism. Further, Will and James Wilson argued that those most likely to apply for Conversation grants were “activists” who are “most disaffected with America” and disagree that we share a common culture (Will, 1994; Wilson, 1994).

Meanwhile, some on the left decried Hackney’s focus on a shared national identity and common values. For writers such as Katha Pollitt, there may be no single definition of American identity; to construct one artificially borders on dangerous nationalism. Also, the Conversation might simply celebrate middle-class definitions of family and responsibility, thus stigmatizing the poor and people of color (Pollitt, 1994). The result would be to increase the very divisiveness Hackney wished to overcome.

Finally, some less partisan critics noted skeptically that controversial issues “are not going to be resolved merely by discussing them” (Feinsilber, 1994). Hackney could hope, but certainly not assume, that the Conversation would lead to political action that addresses the deep issues dividing Americans. Hackney himself interpreted these criticisms as further proof that the Conversation was needed. They also allowed him to stake out for NEH a rhetorical middle ground between a “patriotic, Euro-American conformity” and “a camouflaged promotion
of multiculturalism” (Hackney, 1994). Hackney also received support from many who argued that NEH could at least help to provide the questions, the resources, and the structure for civil conversations, as opposed to the posturing, insults, and shouting that pass today as deliberation (“America,” 1994; Stimpson, 1994b). Moreover, as Catherine Stimpson put it, “just talking to somebody else makes it harder to demonize them” (Otto, 1994). Another supporter, Martha Minow, while admitting that “talk cannot solve all our problems,” observed that without talking “we cannot even be sure what those problems are or, indeed, who we are” (Minow, 1994, p. 11).

As can be seen, Hackney’s Conversation is pertinent to several recent debates in American political science. These include the debate about trust in American government (Bennett & Bennett, 1996; Craig, 1996, pp. 46–47; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Merelman, 1998); social capital (Norris, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Schneider et al., 1997); and civic engagement (Boyte, 1989; Fishkin, 1995; Mathews, 1994; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995); the debate about value consensus in the United States (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996; Smith, 1993; Tropman, 1989); and the debate about the components of an American identity (Garry, 1992; Hollinger, 1995; Wolfe, 1998). Our intent here is to synthesize these debates into a single project, namely the exploration of unity and diversity in contemporary American political culture. The National Conversation provided a forum for a subset of Americans to grapple with many of the competing values, beliefs, and arguments that make up American political culture today (Chilton, 1988; Inglehart, 1997; Welch, 1993). Our study focuses specifically on the complex relationship between two cultural values: a shared national identity, and ethnic and racial pluralism in America.

Some scholars of American political culture have already investigated this topic. However, most empirical studies have relied on either survey data (Craig, 1993; Inglehart, 1997; Muller & Seligson, 1994) or analyses of pertinent cultural representations such as films (Powers, Rothman, & Rothman, 1996; Rogin, 1996); television presentations (Merelman, 1995; Mumford, 1995; Norton, 1993); rituals (Bodnar, 1992; Sturken, 1997); and periodicals (Chermak, 1995). Unfortunately, both approaches have serious limitations. Survey data do not capture citizens in the process of using their preferred values, ideas, and beliefs in social settings of their own choosing. Citizens do not simply state their views, as survey findings often imply. Rather, they advance their beliefs, values, and ideas in discourse with each other. Studying the National Conversation helps us to capture this discursive process.

Most analyses of cultural representations, though highly suggestive, do not provide direct evidence of how citizens interpret the representations they see and hear (but see Hunt, 1997). By contrast, our analysis reports direct evidence about how a set of Americans actually incorporate the content of American political culture into their political discourse. We can thus shed new light on how American
citizens use the resources of American political culture to reconcile national unity and group diversity in American politics.

Our analysis is divided into four parts. First, drawing on relevant literature on American political culture and public opinion, we set forth five hypotheses about the National Conversation. Second, we describe the methodology of our study and provide salient facts about the conversations we observed. Third, using qualitative data, we explore each of the five hypotheses. Finally, we venture some tentative arguments about the current relationship between national identity and ethnic and racial pluralism in American political culture.

**Hypotheses**

*Characterizations of American identity.* Many studies of American political culture report the existence of a positive national identity among Americans. Writers report that Americans associate “being American” with such prized values as individualism, personal freedom, constitutional rights, economic opportunity, social equality, ideological tolerance, and political democracy (Hochschild, 1981; Lipset, 1990; Marcus et al., 1995; McClosky & Brill, 1983; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Wilson, 1997). Some writers have even asserted that there is an “American Creed” that most Americans share (Lipset, 1967; Myrdal, 1944).

At the same time, recent research reveals a large reservoir of public hostility toward American political institutions and leaders (Dionne, 1991; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Nelson, 1995). Also, there has long existed a rich literary criticism of American character, replete with accusations of excessive materialism, of anti-intellectualism, of dog-eat-dog competition, and of personal shallowness or superficiality (e.g., Dreiser, 1927; Updike, 1960; Wolfe, 1987). Finally, in recent studies Americans decry widespread political corruption, incompetence, and deception, and also display unprecedentedly low levels of confidence in government (Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997).

From this complex body of writing, we offer our first hypothesis: A predominantly positive American identity will emerge in the Conversation, but there will also be a substantial undertone of negativity. Our hypothesis presumes that, although Americans may be quite conscious of flaws in American national identity, they will persist in believing the identity itself to be basically laudable.

*Characterizations of ethnic pluralism and identity.* In general, Americans, especially ethnic minorities, appear to approve of ethnic identity and ethnic pluralism (Phinney, 1996). Many Americans believe that ethnic groups offer a sense of roots, pride in self, necessary social solidarity, and valuable traditions, symbols, and ways of life. Moreover, advocates of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” have recently conveyed an enhanced enthusiasm for ethnic and racial identity (Glazer, 1997). Finally, for many Americans, ethnic pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of multiple ethnic groups—is a unique and worthwhile achievement of the American experience (for an academic example, see Cochran, 1995–96).
Hence, we propose our second hypothesis: Characterizations of ethnic pluralism and identity in the conversations will be predominantly positive.

**Characterizations of ethnic and racial relations.** Recent research reveals sharp ethnic and racial differences over affirmative action, domestic social programs, the pace and extent of progress toward racial equality, school desegregation, police and court treatment of racial minorities, and sensational events such as the O. J. Simpson trial and the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings (Dyson, 1996, p. 52; Hochschild, 1995; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Patterson, 1997; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Thomas et al., 1993; but see Rucinski, 1993). Moreover, the media often portray race and ethnic relations unfavorably (Gilens, 1996; Gray, 1995). Therefore, we offer our third hypothesis: Participants in the conversations will mainly picture ethnic and race relations negatively. They will emphasize strife, confrontation, and political conflict between ethnic and racial groups.

**Subgroup differences.** Existing research reveals that relatively less advantaged and less powerful subgroups in the United States hold comparatively unfavorable views of American national identity, and also depict ethnic and racial relations as particularly strife-ridden (Aberbach & Walker, 1973; Garcia, 1997; Hochschild, 1995; Jackman, 1994; McClain & Stewart, 1995, chap. 3). At the same time, “identity politics”—the recent political assertion of ethnic, race, and gender identities—promotes the interests of disadvantaged, less powerful subgroups (Bledsoe et al., 1996). These considerations lead us to our fourth hypothesis: In the conversations, racial minorities and women (more than whites and men) will hold negative views about American national identity, and also about the character of race and ethnic relations in America. At the same time, racial minorities and women will speak more positively about race and ethnic identity, and also about ethnic pluralism.

**The discursive structure of the conversations.** As Hackney’s statements suggest, the conversations might have followed a distinctive discursive course flowing from an emphasis on ethnic pluralism and identity to an emphasis on American national identity. Perhaps participants invoked American national identity to overcome ethnic and racial conflict in the United States. Of course, the opposite path could also have appeared: The conversations might have moved from an emphasis on American national identity to an emphasis on ethnic and racial pluralism, a course perhaps suggestive of fragmentation, not the resolution of ethnic strife. Let us call the former path an “American identity pattern” and the latter an “ethnic identity pattern.”

These two patterns may be contrasted with a third possibility. Instead of the conversations moving sequentially from topic to topic, participants may have simply repeated themselves. A conversation would then consist of discursive stability rather than sequential movement. For example, conversationalists may have oscillated repetitively between national identity and ethnic pluralism, settling on neither topic as a dominant theme. Or they may have emphasized national
identity or ethnic pluralism repeatedly throughout an entire conversation. Let us call this possibility the “repetition pattern.”

Attention to discursive structure reaches to the very heart of the Conversation initiative. Does the Conversation produce any sort of discursive reconciliation between American national identity and ethnic identity and pluralism, a difficult task given the likely perception of ethnic and racial struggle in the United States? Does any theory emerge that harmonizes American identity and ethnic pluralism (Carmines & Merriman, 1993; Hunter, 1991)?

These considerations lead us to our fifth hypothesis: The conversations will unfold sequentially, avoid repetition, and ultimately reconcile American national identity with ethnic identity and pluralism. This hypothesis rests on the belief that the norms of conversation favor consensus and harmony among participants (for a vivid demonstration, see Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Moreover, we believe participants themselves desire the conversations to progress toward a reconciliation of American national identity with ethnic and racial pluralism. Certainly reconciliation would be both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. By contrast, repetition and nonresolution could well provoke dissatisfaction, frustration, and disappointment. We believe participants preferred to avoid these unpleasant outcomes.

The Study

The data for this analysis come from a combination of observational, participant observational, and questionnaire studies of 31 NEH-sponsored local conversations during 1995 and 1996 in St. Paul, Minnesota; Green Bay, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois; and Kenosha/Racine, Wisconsin. Some of the conversations included audiences as large as 100 people, who discussed a specific topic for a single evening. For example, we examined conversations at the Field Museum in Chicago on such topics as “Africa’s Meaning for All Americans” and “The Creation of National Identity.” By contrast, in St. Paul and Green Bay small groups (5 to 15 people) met three or four times over several weeks to discuss a single topic. Thus, we were able to analyze the diverse formats that typified NEH Conversations throughout the United States.

In large audience settings, such as those in Kenosha/Racine and at the Field Museum, the investigators were silent and unobtrusive observers. With the agreement and assistance of organizers, we took copious field notes during each conversation. Also, immediately after the conversation, the investigators completed a standard open-ended summary questionnaire that addressed such questions as the amount of consensus or conflict in the conversation, ethnic or gender differences that appeared among conversationalists, positive and negative aspects of American identity discussed in the conversation, the perceived connection between ethnic identity and American identity, and the particular substantive issues that caused conflict or agreement among participants.
In St. Paul and Green Bay, a single investigator took part in each small group conversation. The investigator identified himself or herself as a citizen who, like others in the group, was concerned about the subject, and also as an academic conducting a research study. We assured all participants in the conversations that their comments would remain anonymous. No conversationalist objected to our presence, and none reported or evidenced any inhibition during the conversations. The investigators were careful not to push the conversation toward any particular ideological conclusion, intervening mainly to introduce an issue that had yet to be discussed.

In the small groups, the participant-observer could not take detailed field notes; to do so would have drawn unwanted attention to the research element of the enterprise. In a few cases, individual groups permitted the conversation to be taped. However, in most cases the participant-observer simply jotted down an occasional note during the conversation. Then, immediately after the conversation, the investigator reconstructed the conversation on paper, aided by a fresh memory and a few notes. The result was a reasonably detailed set of field notes. Finally, each investigator filled out the summary questionnaire described above.

In qualitative, site-specific research, the question of reliability naturally emerges. Given the absence of a tape-recorded or visual record of most conversations, the investigators could not conduct a rigorous content analysis. However, the investigators attempted to ensure some reliability by observing the large-format conversations in groups of two. Each observer independently took detailed notes and then filled out the summary questionnaires. Comparison of the two sets of field notes and summary questionnaires revealed approximately a 70% level of agreement on the content and main themes of each conversation. Although this is a lower level of agreement than is desirable, it is sufficient to warrant—with caution—the arguments we advance (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Just et al., 1996). We are, of course, aware that our upper Midwestern research sites may not typify conversations elsewhere, which lends further caution to our analysis. We stress that ours is an exploratory, not a definitive, analysis of the conversations.

There were major differences among conversation formats. In the large conversation formats, a panel of speakers usually presented their views on the subject at hand, which then generated audience discussion. In the St. Paul small groups, individual leaders followed the “study circle” method of conversation popularized in the United States by Leonard P. Oliver (1987). In both Green Bay and St. Paul, conversationalists had presumably read three or four assigned articles, which provided points of departure. However, group leaders varied in their attention to the readings. Although no single overarching “leader effect” emerged in the conversations, we did pay close attention to the leader’s style where it seemed important.

As an attempt at methodological triangulation, we supplemented our participant observations with a survey instrument. Distributed at the end of each conversation, the survey consisted of open- and closed-ended questions tapping the
participant’s views on both American national identity and the conversations themselves.

We distributed about 800 surveys of which 251 were returned, for a response rate of about 32%. This sample tended to be more female and more white than the overall population of conversation attendees, and hence should be treated as biased. Nevertheless, bias on surveys tends toward the individuals more interested in the subject. The early sexual practice studies are a good example of this phenomenon—those most fascinated with their own sexuality were most likely to participate in the survey (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). So, in some sense, the bias in this sample is toward the more active and involved participant. Our brief quantitative analysis presents basic descriptive statistics such as marginal frequencies (Table I).

To probe relevant predispositions brought by participants to the conversations, we asked the respondents to rate nine values in relation to their importance in “being an American.” In contrast to Citrin et al. (1990), who asked many of the same questions, we found our respondents to be liberal politically. For example, Citrin et al. found that 40% of their California general public sample thought believing in God is a “very important” ingredient for being a good American, whereas only 19% of our sample did so. Table II shows the marginal percentages for each of the nine characteristics. In our sample, “supporting multiculturalism,” “voting in elections,” “being a citizen,” and “treating people of all races and backgrounds equally” are the four most important characteristics for being a true American. Because of the bias in our sample, we must be cautious in interpreting these data. Nevertheless, the conversations we observed appear to have attracted a comparatively liberal population with a liberal definition of “being American.”

We also evaluated reactions to the conversations. We asked the respondents if the conversations left them feeling optimistic or pessimistic about the future of ethnic and racial relationships in the United States. 37.3% felt optimistic, 16.2% felt pessimistic, and 46.6% felt neither optimistic nor pessimistic. This pattern of findings is obviously pertinent to our five hypotheses, which we will explore with

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-American</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race or ethnicity</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
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*Note. Race is self-reported, and respondents (n = 251) were allowed to choose more than one category.*
qualitative data. As we will see, rehearsing arguments in favor of and against various aspects of American identity taxed many participants, who concluded that the conversations, while useful opportunities to exchange ideas, ultimately reached no definitive conclusions.

We also asked the participants whether they thought the relationship between ethnic pluralism and American identity was harmonious or conflictive, a question directly pertinent to the last of our hypotheses. The majority (62.1%) found the answer to be somewhat harmonious and somewhat conflictive; 18.2% thought the relationship mainly harmonious, and 19.7% found it mainly conflictive. This finding, like the finding reported above, suggests that participants were conscious of the struggle between American identity and ethnic pluralism in the conversations.

Of the nine characteristics of American identity (Table II), only two showed any significant gender differences. Interestingly, more women than men (72% vs. 58%) saw voting in elections to be an important part of being American. As our fourth hypothesis would lead us to expect, there were also strong gender differences in support for multiculturalism, with women again being more supportive than men (67% vs. 41%). Surprisingly, however, there were no significant racial differences in rating the characteristics of American identity. Nor did racial or gender differences appear in the evaluations of the conversations, or in judgments about the relationship between American identity and ethnic pluralism.

In summary, the National Conversation forums we examined appear to have attracted a distinctively liberal group of Americans, unusually sympathetic to multiculturalism and egalitarianism. This self-selected group filled the “public space” of the conversations with their own version (Mathews, 1994, p. 99; Merelman,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percent responding “very important”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991 National Sample</td>
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<tr>
<td>Believing in God</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting in elections</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking English</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to get ahead on one’s own effort</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treating people of all races equally</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending America when it is criticized</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a citizen</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting multiculturalism</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing the same values as other Americans</td>
<td>–</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. The question reads: “There is much talk these days about what a true American is. How important do you think the following characteristics are in making someone a true American?”

*From Citrin et al. (1992), table 2. †From Citrin et al. (1990), table 1. ‡Missing data in cited study.
1988) of American national identity. However, as our reaction data suggest, there was much room in the conversations for many different points of view.

Exploring the Hypotheses

To explore our five hypotheses empirically, we pursued two forms of data analysis. For the first four hypotheses, we relied on each observer’s summary sheet characterizations of individual conversations. Open-ended questions on each summary sheet required the observer to characterize each conversation in terms directly related to the five hypotheses. For example, questions on each summary sheet asked the participant-observer to characterize the positive and negative attributions to American national identity that appeared in each conversation. We compiled simple frequency distributions of these positive and negative attributions for each conversation, and then aggregated these distributions to arrive at a summary figure for the entire set of 31 conversations. Inspection and, where appropriate, significance tests of these aggregated distributions provide the basis for our decisions about whether the data support our hypotheses. We also relied on the summary sheets to identify the specific types of characterizations, such as individualism or the American Creed. The specific summary sheet items are described below.

In addition, we examined the participant-observer’s detailed field notes of each conversation. These notes provide the most complete chronological picture of each conversation as it unfolded topic by topic, statement by statement, exchange by exchange. We drew on the field notes for the many examples we report to illustrate our findings. In addition, the field notes revealed unexpected yet vital features of the conversations, such as the cycling phenomenon that we discuss below. We will describe these two forms of data analysis further in the context of individual hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Characterizations of American Identity

Most conversationalists found the concept of national identity complex and distant from their personal experiences. An example from panelists in Kenosha illustrates the point. One black participant observed that there is no agreement on the appropriate metaphors for describing American identity. He then offered several possibilities, including “salad bowl,” “melting pot,” “tapestry,” and “kaleidoscope.” To these four, another black member of the audience added “pool table,” explaining wryly that in pool the white ball pushes the colored balls around. An Asian audience member then suggested “stir-fry.” This vignette reveals a number of reasons why national identity proved troublesome for conversationalists. First, the absence of agreed metaphors makes the concept difficult to use in conversation. Second, as the “pool” suggestion illustrates, some metaphors evoke conflict rather than consensus. Finally, as the Asian conversationalist’s interjection demonstrates,
people are disposed to project their personal experiences onto the concept. Thus, American national identity is simultaneously abstract, conflicted, and projective.

Nevertheless, most of the conversations did productively engage the subject of American national identity. The summary sheet asked observers to record “the positive aspects of American identity as seen in the conversation.” Observers recorded a total of 42 separate positive references to aspects of American national identity. These positive attributions included many different qualities, the most frequent of which were “individualism” and the “American Creed.” Though conversationalists rarely dwelt on these qualities and often had difficulty giving them real substance, these references themselves give some support to our first hypothesis.

Three versions of individualism appeared. Many people simply mentioned the term “individualism” in answer to a specific question about American national identity raised by either the conversation leader or another participant. For example, in one St. Paul small group, “individualism” arose in response to the leader’s invitation late in the conversation to consider what Americans have in common. However, the substantive components of “individualism” received no attention. Indeed, people appeared to assume that individualism was self-evidently meaningful. Thus, in this usage, individualism served mainly as a symbol of American identity.

A substantive concept of individualism did emerge in the context of personal rights. For example, when the leader of one Green Bay conversation asked, “What keeps us together as a nation?,” participants answered with the Bill of Rights, and argued that individual freedom was a unifying myth for Americans. Interestingly, however, participants did not associate the rights concept of individualism with political institutions or historical events. This observation foreshadows a theme on which we will expand later: namely, the infrequent appearance of explicit political or historical content in the conversations.

A third aspect of individualism was the concept of personal choice. For example, in one Green Bay conversation, participants argued that the United States lets people choose the “best of all possible worlds” or the “best of two cultures” in order to construct their own identities. In this version, individualism, while an attribute of American identity, is mainly a method for constructing a personal identity built from American materials. Thus, in this version individualism has limited range (see also Kondo, 1990).

The concept of an American Creed, described in political terms by Myrdal (1944) and in economic terms by Hochschild (1995), provided an additional positive element to national identity. As distinguished from individualism, the Creed spotlights equal opportunity, the striving for success, and the independence of American citizenship from social class, race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. By severing citizenship from race, class, ethnicity, gender, or religion, the American Creed provides each person the opportunity to pursue success. The Creed also
produces political equality, representative politics, and tolerance for group differences.

Aside from individualism, the American Creed supplied the most common positive element of American national identity in the conversations. Thus, in a forum at the Field Museum on “The Creation of National Identity” (7 September 1995), a number of speakers elaborated on the American Creed. One speaker pointed out that the distinctive quality in the founding of the United States was the decision to define the nation solely in political terms. Other panelists chimed in, mentioning as components of the Creed belief in family, in equality, and in political and social tolerance.

However, some expected components of the American Creed were conspicuously absent from the conversations. For one thing, as is illustrated by the Field Museum example above, the economic opportunity element of the Creed played only a small part in the conversations. Indeed, many conversationalists considered economic competition to be more divisive than unifying in the United States.

In addition, to our surprise, conversationalists rarely mentioned democracy as a component of the Creed. For example, people infrequently discussed the American Creed in such political terms as the citizen’s right to vote, to be represented, to hold office, or to influence office holders. Thus, conversationalists implicitly distinguished between American identity and democratic political participation.

A useful illustration of these points emerges from the Field Museum conversation cited above. Uncharacteristically, one of the expert panelists specifically advanced democracy as something that unified Americans. The panelist claimed that democracy embodied the American Creed’s political egalitarianism. But this provocative statement failed to resonate with the audience. Instead, the next speaker ignored democracy entirely and urged the audience to learn more about our history. The first audience member to speak then denounced double standards in America. This intervention diverted the conversation to issues of race and ethnicity. The concept of democracy never returned to the discussion.

Moreover, the form of equality that conversationalists generally attributed to the American Creed differed significantly from that described by Myrdal and Hochschild. Participants focused on equality as respect for group and individual differences, not as shared economic opportunity or political equality. Moreover, this “respect for differences” interpretation of equality assumed no agreement on any substantive values. Thus, the American Creed became equality among different points of view, rather than a shared single set of values.

Not only did the Creed’s content differ from what we had expected, but so also did its role within the conversations. Usually it was expert panelists or group leaders who introduced the American Creed; most ordinary conversationalists rarely invoked the concept, nor mentioned its components. Thus, whatever power the American Creed might have had was confined to a minority of articulate participants in the discussions (by contrast, see Hunter & Bowman, 1996, p. 6).
In summary, a positive American national identity, consisting of individualism and the American Creed, did manifest itself in the conversations. However, this identity was narrower than we had expected. Still, these findings provide initial support for our first hypothesis.

Equally important to our hypothesis is the fact that negative attributions to American identity emerged as frequently as did positive attributions. The summary sheet asked observers to record the negative aspects of American identity in each conversation. In response to this question, observers actually recorded more negative attributions to American identity than positive attributions (50 negative, 42 positive). For participants, therefore, American identity is a complex amalgam of failure and success, admirable ideals and flawed realities.

Negative conceptions of American identity covered a wide spectrum. For one thing, economic inequalities played a stronger negative role than we expected. In addition, some conversationalists charged that Americans hypocritically profess but do not practice the American Creed and individualism. Others claimed that being an American is essentially defined by excessive commercialism, rampant consumerism, and the greedy pursuit of success. American political institutions also occasionally received criticism.

A particularly interesting example of the commercialism/consumption theme emerged in a Green Bay conversation. Initially, conversationalists mentioned the “hard work brings success” element of the American Creed positively. Immediately, however, a participant retorted that in America hard work often doesn’t bring success, but instead promotes economic inequality. This observation led other participants to denounce the destructively materialist pursuit of money and consumption in America. Thus, in the space of a few moments, the positive myth of hard work and success had mutated into a denunciation of American materialism.

In the St. Paul conversations, participants paid particular attention to the negative effects of class inequalities. For example, in one conversation, discussants attributed St. Paul’s racial and ethnic animosities to disparities in income and opportunity. In lamenting the disruption of neighborhood in St. Paul, one participant denounced the “malling” of America, as symbolized by the nearby Mall of America, the largest shopping center in the United States. In this conversation the Mall seemed to symbolize economic inequalities, the American ethic of consumerism, the worship of materialism, and the destructive impact of media advertising.

Finally, there were instances of hostility toward and suspicion of American political institutions. For example, at a Field Museum forum on “The Packaging of Culture,” one audience participant argued that the media often stereotype people, citing race as an example. She then broadened her critique beyond race and the media, commenting that institutions in general often deceive Americans, manipulating them to believe in cultural packages that are ultimately disempowering to citizens.

Taken as a whole, the data do not support our first hypothesis. Though the theme of national identity did permeate the conversations we observed, national
identity was also distinctly ambivalent, rather than predominantly positive as our hypothesis predicted (for a similar reaction from the business world, see “Downsizing,” 1996). Therefore, we reject our first hypothesis. We will return to this finding later, when we consider connections between American identity and ethnic and racial pluralism in the conversations.

Hypothesis 2: Characterizations of Ethnic Identity and Pluralism

As hypothesized, participants in the conversations generally characterized ethnic and racial identity positively. One item on our summary sheet required observers to “describe the positive and negative aspects of ethnic identity” in each conversation. In response to this item, observers recorded 29 positive and 19 negative references to ethnic identity ($\chi^2 = 2.08, p = .07$). We judge this finding strong enough to support our second hypothesis. Two aspects of these data bear special mention. First, ethnic identity itself played a less prominent role in the conversations than did national identity, perhaps signifying the predominance of the latter in the conversationalists’ minds. Second, though predominantly sympathetic to ethnic identity, conversationalists also perceived a dark underside to the concept.

Positive attributions to ethnic identity generally followed the lines we expected. Participants emphasized the pride that ethnic identity conveyed, the contribution of ethnic identity to people’s self-knowledge, and the larger sense of social solidarity ethnics enjoy with co-ethnics. For example, in one Green Bay small group, a white male participant argued that, for blacks, group identity provides a sense of “roots” and an indispensable avenue toward self-understanding. A variant of this argument occurred in another Green Bay conversation, where a rabbi observed that strong ethnic identity protects Jews from the exclusions historically visited on them by non-Jews. A black woman participant took up this theme, noting regretfully that racial integration had weakened historically black colleges. She herself felt torn between a desire to teach in a wholly black institution and a reluctance to give up the ideal of an integrated American society.

As this last observation suggests, participants often identified drawbacks associated with ethnic identity. The most significant of these drawbacks, not surprisingly, was the potential of ethnic identity to divide Americans from one another. For example, in one St. Paul small group, conversation participants sharply disagreed about the value of ethnic identity. Some in the group argued that ethnic identity and diversity added richness to the lives of all Americans. A black male then pointed out that this same identity and diversity, if exaggerated, could cause separatism in the United States. As can be seen, though positively inclined toward ethnicity, participants rarely endorsed the concept without qualification.
Hypothesis 3: Characterizations of Ethnic and Racial Relations

We find strong support for our third hypothesis. Our summary sheet asked the observers to characterize each conversation “as essentially conflictive, harmonious, or a mixture” in its treatment of ethnic and racial relations. Overwhelmingly, observers characterized the conversations as portraying racial and ethnic relations in America to be conflictive. Our summary sheets revealed 21 references to hostile relations between ethnic and racial groups, only nine references to a complex, mixed relationship between ethnic and racial groups, and only three characterizations of ethnic and racial relations as harmonious ($\chi^2 = 15.273, p = .0001$); this constitutes clear evidence in support of the hypothesis. In fact, this topic generated the most frequent and passionate personal accounts among conversationists. Participants often seemed to use vivid anecdotes about racial and ethnic discrimination to authenticate their right to speak on the subject of ethnicity. No other topic so linked the personal to the political as did the character of ethnic and racial relations.

Consider, for example, the first of four small group conversations in Green Bay. When the issue of local racial discrimination surfaced, several white males described their own initial encounters with the problem. They marveled at their prior innocence, and lamented their inability to appreciate fully how blacks feel. They also condemned the unearned benefits of being white in America. Later in the conversation, a black male and a white female characterized conditions in the black community as similar to those in the Third World. This observation triggered another series of personal narratives about racism.

Aside from legitimizing individual participation in the discussion of race, personal anecdotes created a confessional aura that drove the conversation toward the all-pervasiveness of racism. At the same time, personal stories also individualized racism, reducing attention to its social origins, historical evolution, and politics. Indeed, it seemed almost as if personal experiences were so traumatic that they overshadowed structural or psychological approaches to racism.

The personalized approach to racial discrimination in the conversations may also have impeded discussants from agreeing on a single diagnosis of the problem. Instead, “soft” and “hard” theories of racism developed. The soft theory attributes racism to white ignorance of blacks, to a lack of cosmopolitan experience, to poor education, and to distorted media coverage. By contrast, the hard theory attributes racism to power struggles over economic position and social privilege. The soft theory finds a possible solution to racism in the diffusion of knowledge; the hard theory, however, envisions no solution to the problem.

A good example of the soft theory of racism emerged in one of the Green Bay conversations. At first, discussants attributed racism to the fact that Green Bay attracts many whites from racially homogeneous small towns. A black man then told an anecdote about encountering a Ku Klux Klan member in a southern bar, having a beer with him, and convincing him that blacks weren’t really demons.
Next a black woman recounted her experience of being called a “nigger” in Green Bay; she followed this observation with a story about one of her closest friends, who is white. She concluded that if people simply get to know each other, racism will decline.

As this vignette indicates, the soft theory of racism is comparatively optimistic. It assumes that there exist relatively easy remedies—education, contact, and friendship—which can overcome the problem. Understandably, it provides a comfortable halfway house in conversations between racial minorities and whites. It permits racial minorities not only to attack racism but also, indirectly, to confront whites in the group. At the same time, it permits whites to acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism, but also to excuse its practitioners. After all, ignorance and provincialism are not evil, as would be conscious malevolence and intended discrimination. The soft theory provides whites an “out” and minorities a chance to establish racism as a negative part of American life. So the soft theory can accommodate both whites and blacks in the conversation.

The hard theory of racism is more pessimistic; it asserts that racism protects and expresses structurally embedded power inequalities between whites and blacks. The origins of racism lie in social, economic, and political competition that the individual cannot control. For example, in one Green Bay conversation, a black man and a white woman claimed that white racism was a product of increased job insecurity, for which blacks were blamed. This observation elicited a discussion of the unearned power that whites enjoyed by virtue of racial discrimination. The conversation then introduced a broader argument—namely, that not only economic insecurity but also fundamental class disparities among whites generated racism. One black female went so far as to predict there would be a class war in the United States; she lamented that the halcyon days of the 1960s—when good economic times permitted whites and blacks to be allies—had given way to vicious economic competition that now divided blacks from whites.

Where proponents of the soft theory easily identified possible remedies for racism—such as more education, fairer media, and increased social contact—proponents of the hard theory had trouble envisioning potential solutions. For example, there was virtually no discussion about the possibility of reducing economic inequalities. Nor did conversationalists foresee coalitions of blacks and whites addressing racial injustice. Perhaps it is the absence of remedies that explains the bleak tone adopted by proponents of the hard theory.

Interestingly, the emotional force of racism was connected to conversationalists’ hostility toward “elitism.” By elitism, we mean expert—often academic—discourse on race. The topic of race seemed to stimulate conversationalists to attack “experts.” Often participants argued that experts don’t really confront the true problem of race, but are patronizing and out of touch.

A good example of anti-elitism occurred in the first Field Museum forum, which considered the image of Africa in the American mind. The forum began with eight expert panelists providing background information on relevant aspects of
African history, such as slavery, colonialism, and trade. The panelists then called for the media to do a better job explaining Africa to Americans, and to highlight the positive contributions of Africans to American life.

The panelists also focused on the role of the Field Museum in correcting images of Africa. This focus conveyed a professional, didactic element to the conversation. However, the panel’s assumption of expertise elicited much audience criticism. One questioner stated that Afrocentrism is not necessarily wrong, and argued that the museum should support Afrocentrism. Next, a black woman in the audience noted that the first settler of Chicago—Du Sable—was black. This interjection led to audience attacks on the Chicago Tribune for alleged misleading stories about blacks. Then another questioner directly attacked the museum, claiming its views of Africa were antiquated. Next, a white questioner defended the museum and denounced the belief in elite conspiracies regarding race. Finally, the moderator of the forum acknowledged that perhaps the panel’s presentations had been too expert and lacked connection to the strong emotions swirling around race.

Although relatively few conversations contained anti-elitist attacks on experts, it was race that elicited most of these attacks. We believe this phenomenon reflects suspicion that—where race is concerned—intellectuals, the media, and institutional leaders are not wholly to be trusted.

Hypothesis 4: Subgroup Differences

We find modest support for our hypothesis that women will perceive more racial and ethnic conflict than men, and strong support for our hypothesis that racial and ethnic minorities will perceive more such conflict than whites. One question on our summary sheet required the observer to decide whether whites and blacks, or men and women, differed significantly in each conversation. On our summary sheets there were five instances in which women detected more ethnic and racial conflict than men, and none where men detected more such conflict than women. Although they were in the hypothesized direction, these differences are weak; mainly they show that gender as such did not influence the majority of conversations. By contrast, racial and ethnic differences were pervasive among conversationalists. On our summary sheets there were 18 instances in which minority participants perceived more conflictive relationships than whites, and no instances in which whites perceived more such relationships than minorities. This finding clearly supports our hypothesis.

Also, perhaps understandably, whites gravitated to the soft theory of racism more than did minorities (see also Bledsoe et al., 1996, p. 212). An example emerged from one of the Green Bay conversations. The discussion began with the question, “What does it mean to be an American?” Several white participants responded by relating personal anecdotes about white racism and black anger at whites. They argued that racism was the result of learned behavior. However,
several black participants disputed this theory. They argued that white skin brought privileges and power irrespective of people’s personal feelings about race. They too introduced personal anecdotes to establish their point. For example, they expressed their anger at being subjected to surveillance when shopping in Green Bay. One of the white participants then interceded to protect the soft theory. He argued that in the United States “acceptance” and “learning from differences” should be our goal. He explained his own racial tolerance by reference to his educational experience, especially his contact with foreign students in college. This sequence illustrates how white participants often used the soft explanation of racism to counter more damaging assertions.

As the above example illustrates, blacks and other racial minorities were more likely than whites to put forth the hard theory of racism. Consider another example. At the conclusion of a long Field Museum conversation, the white moderator observed that some people believe the individual has power to resist society, while others believe society controls the individual. He, however, “hears a seesaw”; true, inequalities do exist, but individuals can address these inequalities. A young woman quickly challenged this position. She began her remarks by denouncing tracking in schools, which, she said, does not educate, but instead treats young people as factory workers. She then identified herself as Dominican, and stated that individuals do not have choices, that whites have created multiple divisions among ethnic groups, that the media divide minorities, that 75% of blacks at the University of Chicago drop out for lack of university support, and that people must understand how “the system” harms minorities. This example illustrates a common tendency in the conversations: Whites rarely treated structural explanations of inequality as complete explanations, whereas minorities were more willing to make the leap to total structural explanations.

Finally, minority conversationalists frequently distinguished between the ideal of political citizenship in America and the actual practice of citizenship, which often fell short of the ideal. For example, in the final conversation of one Green Bay small group, W. E. B. Du Bois’s remarks on “double consciousness” sparked a spirited debate about whether the ideals of the American Creed extended to blacks. One black male emphatically dismissed the example of Colin Powell as possible evidence that the American Creed has finally embraced blacks. He argued that whites only pay lip service to the Creed; he claimed also that the growing gap between white avowals of the Creed and white performance increased hostility among blacks. As the illustration suggests, minorities were especially sensitive to hypocritical invocations of the American Creed.

**Hypothesis 5: The Discursive Structure of the Conversations**

To investigate the conversations’ discursive structure, we focus on a subset of 21 small group sessions in Green Bay and St. Paul. Unlike the larger group sessions, these conversations did not begin with designated speakers presenting introductory
We hypothesized that the conversations would unfold sequentially, assuming either an ethnic identity pattern or an American identity pattern. To explore this hypothesis, we coded our field notes carefully, recording each instance in which either characterizations of national identity or ethnic identity appeared in the conversation. Then we compared the first half of each conversation to the second half, searching for sequential movement. The evidence does not support our hypothesis. In 11 of the 24 conversations, repetition, not sequence, was the order of the day; indeed, a dominant concern with national identity characterized every phase of these conversations. In four cases we found some evidence of the ethnic identity pattern; in these cases, the second half of each conversation dealt more with ethnicity than did the first half. In six cases we observed the American identity pattern, where significant attention to ethnicity in the first half of the conversation was supplanted by the theme of national identity in the second half.

We also explored patterning by considering sets of conversations, that is, conversations that took place among the same few participants over a series of weeks. There were seven such series among our 21 conversations; we compared the first half of each series to the second half. Our findings indicate that there was sequential patterning within series of conversations. We discovered no instances of repetition, two instances of the ethnic identity pattern, and five instances of the American identity pattern.

How can a dominant repetitive focus on national identity in individual conversations yield sequential patterns over a series of conversations? The answer is that emphasis on the dominant theme—national identity—fluctuated somewhat as the conversational series proceeded. The emphasis on national identity intensified in the last conversations of five series, but decreased somewhat in two other series. Thus, even though conversationalists were preoccupied with national identity throughout individual conversations, they also tried to impose sequence on the conversations as a whole over time.

This finding does not indicate that participants increasingly characterized American identity positively, however. We examined nine individual conversations that contained particularly large increases in references to national identity. In only two of the nine cases did positive references to American identity increase toward the end of each conversation. In the other seven cases, people referred to American identity more negatively as the conversation proceeded. Thus, in these conversations national identity did not provide a benign solution to problems of ethnic and racial conflict in the United States.

Finally, at the end of each conversation, participant-observers recorded on the summary sheet whether the conversation had generated any “theory of compatibility between ethnic identity and American identity.” We interpreted “theory” generously, looking for any version of compatibility, no matter how fragmentary.
Yet we still did not discover any particular theoretical “closure” in most conversations. In only one-third of the cases did the observer detect such a theory, as opposed to two-thirds where no compatibility appeared.

One reason the conversations achieved little theoretical completeness is that participants often advanced multiple characterizations of national identity, which were sometimes inconsistent. This practice allowed for meaningful conversation but little consensus. To conceptualize this phenomenon, we find helpful the approach to ideology developed by Billig et al. (1988), who argued that an ideology—or, in our usage, a national identity—consists of widely shared cognitive dilemmas:

> The dilemmatic approach . . . does not start with the assumption that there is an “inner unity” to schemata or ideologies. By assuming that there are contrary themes, a different image of the thinker can emerge. The person is not necessarily pushed into an unthinking obedience . . . Ideology may produce such conformity, but it can also provide the dilemmatic elements which enable deliberation to occur. The person living within an ideology need not be seen merely as a follower of rules or as a well-programmed machine. However, to uncover the dilemmatic aspects of ideology, it is necessary to look for the contrary themes of lived ideology. (p. 31)

Our investigation of the National Conversation reveals precisely the dilemmatic qualities Billig described (by contrast, see Conover et al., 1991, p. 804). Conversationalists did not share a single set of positively or negatively valenced values. Instead, they shared “contrary themes,” such as felt tension between individual freedom and personal greed, or between inclusive citizenship and class inequality.

Observations of the conversations support this interpretation. In particular, the conversations displayed a phenomenon we call “cycling,” which very much resembles Billig’s dilemmatic conceptualization of ideology.

Individual cycling occurred when, as frequently happened, a conversationalist advanced both a positive and a negative aspect of American identity in the same conversation, and sometimes even in the same utterance. For example, sometimes a discussant commended the United States for its “individualism,” but then immediately lamented the absence of community and the “atomization” of the individual in the United States. Yet the same speaker might in the next breath denounce community as stifling and intrusive. In the St. Paul discussions of community, participants from small towns often cycled between these opposed views. Individual cycling thus consisted of a discussant’s movement between positive and negative aspects of American identity without establishing any coherent final position (see also Ellis, 1993, chap. 1).

Group cycling also occurred. Typically, small group conversations progressed until most of the conflicts of American identity appeared. When the conversation reached this point, one could sense an almost palpable pause, as people attempted
to digest the dilemmas and move forward. Group cycling refers to the fact that most
groups could not pass this point. Instead of choosing between perspectives, dis-
cussants cycled back through the arguments already introduced. Because of cy-
cling, groups often could not reach any clear or novel substantive conclusions.

Still, as reported above, a minority of conversations did generate promising
ideas about reconciling American identity with ethnic pluralism. Though it is
impossible to explore these ideas in detail, they demonstrate how creative partici-
pants could sometimes be. For example, participants occasionally discussed bal-
ance between ethnicity and American identity, voluntary ethnicity as a compromise
between American identity and ethnic identity, and even a transformed, more
synthetic American national identity.

Participants also imagined distinctive tasks for individuals in promoting
reconciliation between ethnic pluralism and American identity. These tasks in-
cluded self-education, challenging racial and ethnic stereotypes, and mediating
relations between different ethnic and racial groups. Thus, the American individu-
alism we discussed earlier sometimes became a springboard for original ways of
reconciling American identity with ethnic pluralism.

At the same time, participants rarely cited political institutions, experience, or
knowledge as helpful in trying to understand the relationship between national
identity and ethnic pluralism. For example, during twelve 2-hour conversations in
St. Paul, there were a total of only 54 references (4.5 per session) to events in
American political history, specific political issues, local organizations and pro-
grams, or state, local, and national policies, politics, and institutions. Thus, partici-
pants did not find the American political experience helpful in solving the dilemma
of ethnic pluralism and American national identity.

Conclusions

We have explored 31 conversations in the National Conversation on American
Pluralism and Identity. We found that conversationalists expressed ambivalence
about American identity; saw ethnic identity and pluralism somewhat positively;
perceived ethnic and race relations as strife-ridden; divided their conversations
along racial lines; and, finally, had difficulty reconciling unity and diversity within
American political culture. We also uncovered unexpected features of the conver-
sations, such as two distinct theories of racism; the phenomenon of cycling; the
personalization of racial and ethnic discussion; and creative ideas for resolving the
tensions between American identity and ethnic pluralism.

Although the conversations we observed do not permit broad generalization,
they do provide a best-case test of the capacity for discussions to reconcile unity
and diversity in American political culture. After all, we observed a comparatively
homogeneous political subset of people, each of whom, merely by choosing to take
part in the National Conversation, demonstrated unusually high interest in politi-
cal discourse. If this distinctive subset could not effectively combine unity and
diversity in American political culture, we doubt that many other Americans could have done so either. In short, our explorations suggest there is considerable dissension and uncertainty within American political culture.

What are the implications of these findings? Certainly some of our results are disquieting. Not only did conversationalists find American national identity deeply flawed, but they also tended to ignore such traditionally positive aspects of American identity as economic opportunity and political democracy. Moreover, discussants seldom depended on political institutions either to manage problems of unity and diversity in the United States or to organize political culture itself. No wonder participants had trouble reconciling unity and diversity in American political culture.

Yet one need not draw entirely pessimistic conclusions from our study. For one thing, as both our open-ended responses and participant observations demonstrate, almost every participant expressed satisfaction with the conversations themselves. Most conversationalists energetically engaged even the most complex issues. Thus, an absence of substantive consensus did not deter conversationalists, who instead remained committed to continuing dialogues about American political culture (Bickford, 1996).

Moreover, the conversations often generated new ideas about American political culture. Consider, for example, such ideas as group-based equality or individual mediation of ethnic and racial group differences. Moreover, participants did not underestimate the dangerous potential for ethnic fragmentation and racial conflict in America. Like the researchers, participants in the National Conversation found themselves in a complex exploration, where they discovered unforeseen aspects of unity and diversity in American political culture. And perhaps—in the very process of discovery—they began the painful task of configuring American political culture into a newly vital form.

For political psychologists, three topics that merit further investigation emerge from this research. These are, first, the nature of organized political deliberations about race, ethnicity, and American national identity; second, the possible reconfiguration of American political culture; and, third, the place of political institutions in American political culture.

The National Conversation paved the way for President Clinton’s conversation initiative on race. Perhaps, organized conversations on race, ethnicity, and American identity are becoming common features of the American political landscape. For this reason alone, political psychologists should investigate such conversations further. Are the dynamics we observed typical of other conversations? Do different formats create substantially different conversations? Why do so few of the cognitive heuristics political psychologists typically describe, such as partisanship and ideology, emerge in these conversations? Why instead do people seem to prefer their own personal experiences to these cognitive shortcuts? And what aspects of political education and socialization shape participants’ capacity to engage productively in these conversations? For example, do students exposed to conflicting
views on American history and identity develop into adults able and willing to engage in productive political conversations (Graff, 1992)? These are but a sample of promising questions for political psychology.

Investigating these questions would draw political psychologists into a productive relationship with normative theorists of deliberative democracy. Can civic dialogue improve participatory citizenship among people with widely different political views? Does organized political conversation create norms of mutual respect, appreciation of diverse views, and a meeting of minds? Or do such phenomena as the personalization of racial conflict and cycling work against more positive outcomes, leaving participants frustrated and divided? Theorists of deliberative democracy, such as Barber (1984), Gutmann and Thompson (1996), and Bickford (1996), need to know the answer to these questions. Political psychologists can help to supply these answers.

Political psychologists might also investigate whether our diagnosis of an American political culture in flux holds true generally. For example, does contemporary political socialization treat ethnic or national identity differently from past treatment of these topics? Do what we suspect to be signs of flux, such as the absence of economic opportunity as a cultural theme or the dilemmatic nature of national identity, characterize other spheres of American political culture? For example, do new social studies textbooks or films about American politics reveal these same qualities? Finally, are survey research techniques adequate to these questions, or—as we suspect—should we also rely on the qualitative approaches applied in this study?

Lastly, we urge political psychologists to investigate the unexpected absence of institutions from discussions of American political culture. Would further studies yield the same findings? If so, why do Americans exclude political institutions from their conceptions of American political culture? Is the psychology of political institutions different from the psychology of political culture? And what if people associate the discussion of politics solely with institutions rather than with political culture (see Cramer, 1998)? These questions are vital, for clearly, without a stronger connection of political culture to political institutions, the full democratic potential of American politics will never be realized.

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