

OPTING OUT: EFFICACY, IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY IN THE MODERN
HOMESTEADING MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Jordan Travis Radke: Opting Out: Efficacy, Identity and Ideology in the Modern Homesteading Movement
(Under the direction of Kenneth Andrews)

This dissertation explores how participants of the Modern Homesteading movement come to account for acts like growing tomatoes and canning beans as protest or dissent. I use homesteading as an example of a lifestyle movement (LM), a loosely organized collective of individuals who change their lifestyles in response to social problems. Through in-depth, open-ended interviews with 49 people, I analyze the conditions under which people participate in LMs, defining participation as the degree to which one accounts for lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action. This dissertation contributes to efforts to diversify the study of movements beyond organizationally coordinated activism targeting change in the public sphere. Studying a movement which accentuates characteristics relegated to the margins of scholarship – private, individualized, everyday activism – magnifies these features for deeper analysis.

I found that people explain their lifestyles using contentious ideologies when doing so restores their ability to claim identities strained by problematic outlooks. Contrary to expectations, participants felt part of meaningless or unstable systems, yet powerless to change them. Despite the presence of pessimism and inefficacy in outlooks (unprompted worldviews/emotions), participants disavowed these perspectives in self-presentations and lifestyle accounts (narratives/rationales for homesteading). I explain this tension using vocabularies of motive, arguing that resignation contradicts participants' explanations of their actions as functions of independence and/or conscientiousness. To such individuals, participation

in irreparably immoral or unstable systems makes them complicit in or controlled by the systems against which they articulate their identity, creating a strain in which worldviews and feelings contradict the identity they seek to claim. Under these conditions, participants explained their homesteading as a way to “opt out” of, and thus reduce compliance with or dependence on, systems – restoring their ability to claim conscientiousness and independence despite resignation, leaving existing systems intact.

This framework – analyzing interviews as self-presentation, examining which narrative elements are espoused and denounced in accounts – offers a contribution to movement scholarship. Additionally, this study illuminates the motivating role of inefficacy under certain conditions; the interplay between identity, efficacy, and ideology; the role of personal identity in participation; the rise in individualization of political expression; and lifestyle dimensions of all movements.

To Keith, who stuck by me, and Avery and Brynn, who kept me going.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It's a kind of living resistance. You're kind of carving out an alternative. You're still inside the system - there's no way to get completely outside of it. But, you can start to subvert it from within I think. And that's what... you do every time you move from consumption to production at even the smallest level - you're refusing to go along.

Keith and Kristin¹ recently bought 20 acres in rural North Carolina, on which they forage for mushrooms, gather firewood to heat their home, garden, compost and raise chickens. Their goal for the future is to provide as much of their own food and income as possible for the family by cultivating an orchard, milking their own cow, and selling produce at the Farmer's Market. They hope to one day turn their land into a collective farming enterprise on which the poor are able to farm for their own food – as well as form a spiritual community. Deeply religious, Keith casts the stories and goals of his life in religious terms, and describes wanting his homesteading efforts to be a form of social justice work rooted in the Christian faith. While Kristin tells me she is spiritual rather than religious, they both describe themselves as altruistic, other-oriented people who want to contribute to the wellbeing of humanity.

Kristin initially became motivated to engage in homesteading practices after learning about the unsustainable use of energy and unethical, unhealthy practices in the conventional food system through documentaries and books. Additionally, Keith and Kristin both attribute much of their exposure to homesteading practices to their interest in and relationships to those who participate in faith-based communal living. Keith and Kristin agree that their lifestyle is a way to “stand up against” the system – broadly defined. Keith describes it as a living resistance, a way

¹ All names, without exception, of the people interviewed for this study have been changed to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

to live out his “convictions” and refuse to participate in a system he doesn’t believe in. As Kristin explains, every dollar is a vote and every dollar retracted from the system is a protest. Keith tells me that he considers them “political,” telling me that for him politics is about pursuing a common good.

In the past, Keith and Kristin have been much more directly involved in politics and community organizing. Keith had a brief career as a community organizer, and both have been involved in public activism through marches and protests. Yet, they tell me that the intense workload and paltry income of community organizing didn’t provide a sustainable income or lifestyle, and that their efforts to “save the world” were putting them in a “suffering position” as a family. Despite the narratives they offered throughout the interview of homesteading as a form of activism oriented toward the public good, at the end of the interview they tell me they are undergoing a process of “turning inward” to focus on the well-being of their family. Keith is now working from home in marketing, and Kristin currently works part time on a farm and takes care of their four children.

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*What is different about me from almost everybody else is the supreme intention with which I live my life. I’m living my life on a, by a set of organized principles that drive my decision making... My art form is creating what I think is the most ideal ten-acre homestead ...*

Rick grew up in a very wealthy community in Manhattan and attended an elite and wealthy boarding school. Groomed to join the corporate world, after college he led a “golden life” working for companies like Time Inc., HBO, and Price Waterhouse Cooper. Yet, Rick began to feel that the corporate life was meaningless and that he was less than human during work hours, telling me that he “dropped out” of the corporate world when he was asked to find tax loopholes for a large mining company. According to Rick, it was then that he decided he no longer wanted to “put his precious life energy” into the corporate world, and went in search of

something “soulful” and “nurturing.” After moving to the area, Rick ran a “green store,” which he describes as a “department store for environmentalists,” started a company that saved houses from landfills, hosted a radio show where he interviewed people about spirituality, and now works as a natural pool builder – calling himself a “dreamscaper.” Rick currently homesteads extensively, living in a straw bale house built with solar panels and composting toilets, while growing his own food in a garden and green house, among other things. He talks of homesteading, but primarily identifies as “living off grid.” He describes these efforts as a way to provide a “model” to others of authentic, sustainable living – though when I ask how he tries to share his lifestyle with others, he tells me that if somebody “wants this” then they’ll find him on their own.

Rick’s motivations for homesteading have changed tremendously since he first began. Initially, he says he was a “hardcore animal rights and environmentalist” activist. He has since undergone a spiritual “awakening experience,” prompted by stumbling upon a book written by an Indian sage, which he tells me freed him from physical reality and led him to believe that environmental change is no longer worth fighting for or possible. He tells me that this new understanding of life and homesteading have allowed him to see that his original conceptions of homestead as a “mission” “doesn’t mean shit” because concern for the world is part of the “illusion of separateness.” Rick tells me that he no longer believes in environmentalism in the same way he used to because he doesn’t classify actions and events as right or wrong, good or bad; rather, he now thinks that the only thing that matters is whether or not you realize who your oneness and the interconnectedness of all living things. He believes that environmental destruction is inevitable due to the unsustainable nature of contemporary lifestyles, and in several places, indicates that he sees environmental activism, including his previous efforts, as

ineffective. Toward the end of the interview, he tells me that he sees his homesteading in some part as an “arc” on which to live when this environmental destruction disrupts daily living for those with conventional lifestyles.

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We have this huge system that's kind of trying to control everything. And you know I... [sighs] I'd almost say everybody's afraid of it, but I think people are at the point where they're more mad about it now. And they're, they're, kind of, [hits table] going like that and saying “I'm gonna go do my own thing. You know, you guys are gonna screw up and make all this genetic crap, and you're gonna try to create financial systems that are gonna be over burdening to us, and so - I'm gonna, I'm gonna take myself out of the system and do what I want to do.”

Isaac is a middle-aged white man who works in finance and lives on 2.5 acres with his wife and eight home-schooled, unvaccinated, and naturally-birthing children. On their land, they raise goats and chickens and cultivate a vegetable garden and fruit trees. Inside the home, Isaac's wife Kelly makes much of her own food – including fermenting kefir and kombucha, making yogurt, and grinding her own wheat for bread. Calling himself a “Prepper” or “patriot,” and secondarily a “Homesteader,” he and his wife prepare for potentially dire times through learning skills “surrounding guns and whatnot,” storing food, and stocking up on ammo. He meets others who engage in similar activities primarily online through Prepping forums, and gets together informally with some of those he connects with online to learn survival skills.

Isaac is deeply critical of the government, telling me that he's "upset" with the political direction of the country because we have gotten away from our constitutional roots. He is frustrated that the government, as well as corporations, hold too much power over his life; he just wants to be left alone. Isaac's solution to such problems is to reclaim control from major powerbrokers to increase our individual "freedom." To him, homesteading is a form of direct protest, opting out of the influence of larger systems. He tells me that he and his wife were prompted to begin their homesteading efforts after he had a conversation that led him to believe

that our “government does not mean our citizens well.” He tells me that powerful institutions, including the government, actively seek to destroy “home-based self-reliant systems” because such systems are exempt from their power, and tells me that the only way to change the world is to increase your self-sufficiency. Yet he has little hope in such change, telling me that we are on the Titanic setting course toward a glacier already, and thinks that unfortunately an apocalyptic “degradation” will occur – possibly leading to civil war.

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*Philosophically speaking, I think that we should minimize harm as much as possible... for my wife it's living simply and intentionally. But I think for me it's ethically as well... examine the aspects of everything that you're doing, and everything you're consuming, and seeing like how it impacts people, not only locally, not only in your own family, but how it impacts the entire planet.*

Randy and Olivia are former journalists that quit their jobs to become goat farmers, as well as editors of a rapidly growing homesteading magazine with a readership of around 75,000 at the time of the interview. Randy tells me that after 20 years of working as a television producer, and Olivia as a marketer for a newspaper, they ceased to be fulfilled by their jobs and lives and began an “experimental process” in which they started looking at “alternative lifestyles” that would free them from an empty, conventional life. After ruling out the option of living in a yurt,<sup>2</sup> they lived in a 12-foot camper for a year before deciding to purchase some land and build a “tinyhome” – or very small house – as a way to reduce their carbon footprint and free up their own funds for other pursuits. Referring to himself as a farmer, but often using the term homesteading, they now live on three acres with their two children, from which they sell eggs, raise goats, and are currently laying plans to begin selling produce. They primarily know people

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<sup>2</sup> A circular, tent-like home adopted from traditional dwellings in Asia.

through a virtual community of “likeminded individuals,” and believe that the “sustainable agriculture” movement is growing.

Randy believes that homesteading is a way to live simply, intentionally, and ethically – an alternative lifestyle that provides a way to drop out of consumer culture and “participate in something larger than ourselves.” He casts himself as someone who has always been interested in “hippie crap,” and sees himself as an intellectual. Minimized in the narrative of how they came to become goat farmers was the fact that Randy was laid off from his journalism job and was “struggling” on unemployment, and then his wife was laid off. Randy was briefly hired back around six months after being laid off, but quit after another year. Despite these financial struggles beyond their control, Randy’s account was that they were just ready for a change of life – they wanted to “live with intention” outside of mainstream culture, because realizing they had been swept up in convention got a little “existential.” Randy does, however, tell me that they want to be able to feed their own family because “it’s quite honestly a little bit more secure for us.”

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The people introduced in these pages are all engaged in what I call “Modern Homesteading” – efforts to increase the self-sufficiency of a household by replacing consumption with in-house production. From raising goats to vegetable gardening, building a straw bale house to foraging for mushrooms, they have adopted a lifestyle in which they attempt to make for themselves what most people purchase from a store. While total self-sufficiency is today quite rare, those who engage in Modern Homesteading selectively participate in some activities of the homesteading lifestyle – such as gardening, composting, preserving food, finding wild edibles, raising chickens or goats, rain-water harvesting, aquaponics, or using grey water.

Key to homesteading is the aspect of voluntary choice; as Matchar (2013) writes, this movement is the “re-embrace of home and hearth by those who have the means to reject these things” (12). Moreover, for Keith and Kristin, Rick, Isaac, and Randy, these efforts are more than hobbies or efforts to save money – they are explained as meaningful pursuits, taken on as deliberate efforts to disengage with the food system, mainstream American culture, or the political system.

These homesteading efforts are, in many ways, recognizable as a social movement – those “loose collectivities acting with some degree of organization, temporal continuity, and reliance on non-institutional forms of action to promote or resist change in the group, society, or world order of which it is a part” (McAdam and Snow 2010:1). Homesteaders see themselves as engaged in conflict – as Keith says, “It’s a kind of living resistance... You can subvert [the system] from within.” They target this conflict toward structures of authority, whether conceptualized broadly as “the system” or oriented specifically toward, for example, political institutions, food production systems, or mainstream cultures of success and work.

Homesteaders engage in non-institutionalized behaviors through unconventional, non-routine lifestyle practices such as making kefir, disconnecting from the electrical grid, or stockpiling ammo. And, they are networked with others engaged in similar behaviors – through which they share ideas (e.g. references to intentionally retracting from powerful systems) and identities (e.g. Homesteader, Prepper, Off-Grid).

While many aspects of Modern Homesteading would be familiar to scholars of movements, homesteading differs in key ways from the types of social movements situated in the center of movement research. Participants see their behaviors as contributing to “something larger than ourselves” (Randy), viewing it in some capacity as a collective endeavor – yet are loosely networked, often only by virtual means, and participants are rarely if ever engaged with

formal organizations. They grant their actions social purpose and talk about them in the context of collective problems, and yet the response is individual, occurring in the private, ongoing actions of everyday life – as Isaac says, “I’m gonna do my own thing.” Homesteaders see their actions as more than household choices, giving them significance and purpose, and yet their actual practices – gardening, raising goats – are not necessarily contentious; individuals can engage in these behaviors with no commitment to dissent or social change. As much as it is a movement of lifestyle practices, homesteading is a movement of *discourse* – a group that understands and claims their mundane, trivial activities to be ideologically-driven.

I argue that this type of movement – a loosely organized collective of individuals who change their private lifestyles in response to perceived social or environmental problems – provides a site uniquely suited to extend our theoretical understanding of participation in social movements. While scholars have long studied motivations to participate in movements (e.g. Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Stryker et al. 2000; Klandermans 1997; Gamson et al. 1982), critics have called attention to how academic research has primarily studied organizationally coordinated activism that targets change in the public sphere (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Haenfler et al. 2012; Snow 2004; Zald 2000). By studying movement participation within a form of activism which makes prominent those characteristics relegated to the margins of scholarly attention – private, individualized, discursive, everyday activism – we magnify these features in a way that provides space for deeper analysis and understanding. The conceptual tools and theoretical insights developed from such study are then transferrable to movement studies widely, as these features are found in all movements, if not their core. In short, I argue that the benefit of studying alternative forms of movements – by which I mean those that differ in some key aspect from the kinds of movements

most conventionally studied – is to enter an empirical frontier in order to develop new conceptual tools, insights, and theories to understand movement behavior more generally.

In this dissertation, I develop a theoretical framework to analyze lifestyle activism that adapts, but extends beyond, dominant social psychological approaches to movement participation and discourse. This framework, centered on a trilogy of interrelated concepts – ideological accounts, outlooks, and vocabularies of motives – provides innovative ways to understand movement participation. As I elaborate later in this introduction, I argue that these analytic tools better account for individual, private activism than the more conventional schemas of frames, collective identities, and emotions. My proposed framework analyzes interviews as evidence of the ways participants tell the stories of their lives and selves, and casts an analytical eye on what narrative elements are espoused (and denounced) in their explanations of their homesteading lifestyles.

In analysis, my primary goal was to determine the extent to which participants explained lifestyle narratives using contentious ideologies, and how this ideological structuring related to other forms of discourse – such as emotional accounts, worldviews, and the articulation of one's personal identity – within interviews. Over the course of two years, I conducted 39 in-depth, open-ended interviews with a total of 49 people – 30 with individuals, and 9 with couples or families – with a purposive sample of individuals who engage in homesteading practices. This dissertation explores how these 49 people came to account for acts like baking bread and canning beans to constitute a form of protest or dissent, communicate ideological commitments, and signal an identity as part of a politicized collective.

Background: Modern Homesteading as a “Lifestyle Movement”

In that participants of the Modern Homesteading Movement primarily engage in ongoing, daily activities within the private sphere, homesteading is a particularly clear articulation of what has been conceptualized as a “lifestyle movement” (Haenfler et. al 2012). A recently theorized but little studied form of movement (Haenfler et al. 2012; Mansbridge and Flaster 2007), lifestyle movements are those which “consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change” (Haenfler et al. 2012: 2). Theories of lifestyle movements follow Giddens (1991) in defining lifestyles as “a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (1991: 81). In other words, lifestyles are groups of behaviors connected through a particular story of the self. Previous work on lifestyle movements has examined such movements as voluntary simplicity, in which participants commit to living less material lives (Grigsby 2004; Murray 2005); vegetarianism (Powell 1992); social responsibility, whose participants focus on ethical consumption (Jones 2002); virginity pledgers, in which participants commit to individual abstention (Haenfler 2010; Bearman and Bruckner 2001); and the locavore movement, in which participants seek to eat only locally produced food (Hinrichs, 2003; Ostrom 2009). This dissertation takes the notion of a lifestyle movement as its point of departure, though as I will discuss below, I contribute to the theoretical development of this concept as well as our understanding of this form of movement.

Synthesizing previous empirical work on lifestyle movements, Haenfler et al. theorize that lifestyle movements are distinct from the formally organized, protest-driven, state-oriented movements conventionally studied by three defining characteristics (2012:2):

- (1) lifestyle choice as a tactic of social change,
- (2) the central role of personal identity work, and
- (3) the diffuse structure of lifestyle movements

Lifestyles are built around recurring and sustained choices, making participation in the movement ongoing rather than episodic, and private rather than public. Given that the locus of change is the individual lifestyle, in such movements participants seek to accomplish social change through individual change in aggregate rather than traditional collective action – though they see their work as a collective project. While individuals act individually, they bear collective issues and concerns in mind. Additionally, movement goals are typically indirect challenges to authoritative structures – particularly dominant cultural codes – sought through adopting and promoting lifestyles. Lastly, lifestyle movements tend to be loosely organized around social networks, which fulfill many of the functions typically performed by organizations, such as recruiting participants (Bennett 2012; Maurer 2002; Jones 2002; Grigsby 2004). Participants may never engage with formal organizations, making it possible that participants seldom interact directly with other movement leaders or participants. Ideas tend to be shared through discourse, such as books or websites, and weak ties formed between participants through online forums or blogs. In this, individuals rather than SMOs become catalysts for action by activating their own networks through social media (Bennett 2012).

The Modern Homesteading movement is a particularly strong embodiment of a lifestyle movement. By definition a system organized around households, the homesteading lifestyle is one that primarily occurs in the private realm. In addition, within the Modern Homesteading movement, individual lifestyle changes are the core and primary activity. Organized public activism plays a relatively minor role, and even such public activism is designed to promote individual, private lifestyle changes – for example, workshops to teach individuals how to make homemade cheese or grow a mushroom log. In short, participants of the homesteading

movement primarily use the ongoing habits of their everyday lives – their lifestyles – as their form of activism. As will be elaborated at length later in this dissertation, participants explained their homesteading activities as efforts to engage with larger social and environmental issues, ranging from climate change to the reclaiming of personal freedom in the face of government imposition.

The notion of a lifestyle movement is intellectually indebted to but extends beyond previous theoretical work that sought to expand the definition of movements to include those that sought cultural change and were more expressive than instrumental in nature. For example, the advancement of the theory of new social movements made space for movements whose struggles existed in the realm of “identity consciousness and programs of life-world commitments” rather than resources and interests (Zald 2000: 3; Melucci 1989; Touraine 1985). Additionally, the prefigurative politics approach showed that some movements seek to prefigure or manifest the changes desired by the movement – in which participants seek to “be the change” they want to see in the world (Breines 1989; Cornell 2011). Yet, such scholars still highlighted public confrontations such as protest, particularly with the state. In contrast, the concept of a lifestyle movement calls attention not only to symbolic forms of movement activity, but those enacted privately in recurring habits of daily life. Similarly, older work on the “politics of lifestyle concern” studied groups that seek to preserve a lifestyle, as for example ensuring that public school books reflect traditional morality (Page and Clelland 1978; Lorentzen 1980). In comparison to this previous work, lifestyle movements differ in that the *recognition* or *preservation* of identities and lifestyles is not always or necessarily the goal; rather, lifestyles are the means of lifestyle movements, aimed toward various ends.

This theory also intersects with but develops work on everyday activism (e.g. Mansbridge and Flaster 2007); lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer 2010) and conscious consumption (Willis and Schor 2012). “Everyday activism” is defined as activism that contributes to social movement goals through making changes “in the realm of daily life” that are congruent with and extend the work of policy or structural goals of the movement (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007: 628). I use the term “lifestyle movement” because everyday activism is conceptualized as an extension of organized activism, whereas the notion of a lifestyle movement leaves open the possibility that this type of activism is not a byproduct of organized activism but a primary or singular strategy of a movement. Portwood-Stacer (2010) defines lifestyle politics as “attempts by individuals to enact their political ideologies through the habitual practices of their everyday lives” (1). This notion is similar to the concept of a lifestyle movement, but her work is not as theoretically developed as Haenfler et al. (2012)’s more elaborated and comprehensive conceptualization. Lastly, conscious consumption, defined as “any choice about products or services made as a way to express values ...” is certainly intimately related to lifestyle movement activism, but is a more limited concept and phenomenon, given that lifestyles encompass much more than consumption (Willis and Schor 2012). While the conception of a lifestyle movement is thus not radically new, in its particular configuration of features it most precisely captures the characteristics of homesteading.

Theoretical Framework

The salient characteristics of lifestyle movements force us to think differently about what constitutes participation. As I argue below, conventional boundaries of establishing who participates in social movements – including engagement in public claims-making, organizational affiliation, or even specific behaviors or acts – do not necessarily apply.

Participation in lifestyle movements is primarily the offering of shared ideological accounts for one's individual lifestyle practices. In the following pages, I propose a theoretical framework to analyze this form of movement participation, which incorporates but enhances prominent social psychological approaches.

My proposed framework centralizes the notion that participation is discursive – the offering of particular accounts of one's lifestyle – and seeks to capitalize on the unique types of data available in interviews. Rather than using interviews as windows into behavior – something that can be problematic given that “what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do” (Jerolmack and Khan 2014) – I use this framework to analyze interviews as self-presentation. I analyze how interviewees explain their engagement in homesteading activities, and the extent to which they draw on contentious ideologies in doing so. Then, I examine how such accounts intersect with the way interviewees tell the stories of their lives, their thoughts and feelings, and the way they articulate their identities, in an effort to understand how people come to adopt contentious lifestyle accounts.

Contentious Ideological Accounts

My dissertation takes the innovative notion of a lifestyle movement as its point of departure, but I propose that a more accurate definition of lifestyle movements would be those in which *people account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action*. Drawing on Zald (2000) and Oliver and Johnston (2000) in ways I elaborate below, I consider participants to account for their lifestyles as *ideologically structured contentious action* when they explain their lifestyles as efforts to embody or express belief systems that attack or defend current social or environmental systems. For example, the vegetarian lifestyle movement would be comprised of those individuals who assign ideological meaning and weight to their efforts to avoid meat –

perhaps to challenge the lack of ethics in animal production, or to confront climate change through reducing their contribution to greenhouse gas emission. Vegetarians who avoid meat because they do not like the texture, or feel that it helps them lose weight, participate in the lifestyle but would not be considered part of a lifestyle *movement*. As I argue below, this definition sets criteria that captures participation in an account-driven, expressive, individualized and private form of movement. Moreover, I argue that this definition copes with problematic assumptions of Haenfler's interpretation of lifestyle movements as those which "consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change" (2012: 2).

In this proposed definition, I contend that participation in lifestyle movements should be defined by the degree to which one *accounts* for one's lifestyle using contentious ideologies – rather than engagement in particular lifestyles, practices or specific acts. Participation cannot be defined by behaviors, given that the same lifestyles can be practiced by those who consider themselves a part of a movement and those who do not; lifestyles can be adopted for necessity, habit, or hobby with no larger social purpose in mind. In lifestyle movements, it is not the practices themselves that is participation in a movement, but rather the understanding of and intention of those practices that sets movement participants apart from those who simply practice a certain lifestyle. Thus, I suggest that participation be defined by the adoption of particular types of shared narratives – specifically, contentious ideological accounts.

By accounts, I mean the purposeful explanations offered to others to explain a behavior as part of one's self-presentation. Grounded in earlier work on impression management (Goffman 1959, 1971) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1956, 1967), the concept of accounts was proposed by Scott and Lyman (1968; Lyman and Scott 1970) originally to examine the ways

in which people seek to justify deviant or negative behaviors. The term has since been expanded to capture the story-like interpretations people offer to account for their conduct (Orbuch 1997), and contemporary sociologists examine the content of accounts, the conditions under which they are presented, and the interactional and intrapersonal consequences of accounts. While to some extent everything humans tell is an account – an interpretation of what occurred or will occur that emphasizes certain aspects and de-emphasizes others to align with a particular story of the self – accounts are most accentuated, as Scott and Lyman (1968) explain, “whenever an action is subjected to valiative inquiry” (46). In other words, when people feel that they have to defend or provide a rationale for their actions, they deploy accounts. In short, interviewees’ accounts of their homesteading lifestyle are the narratives they offer to others and themselves to explain why they homestead.

In determining the type of account given for lifestyle practices that separates movement behavior from non-movement behavior, I propose that such accounts must be *ideological*. For example, one can grow tomatoes because they taste better than store-bought tomatoes, or one can profess to grow tomatoes in protest of the health and environmental impacts of the chemicals used in Big Agriculture. In this, I build on Zald’s (2000) theoretical proposition that movement behavior be understood as *ideologically structured action* (ISA), defined as “that behavior which is guided and shaped by ideological concerns - belief systems defending and attacking current social relations and the social system.” After Zald proposed the concept of ideologically structured action, Klandermans (2000) countered with a call to specificity – movements, he argues, necessary entail contention. To accommodate Klanderman’s (2000) concerns that a focus on ideological accounts potentially marginalizes a focus on contention, I clarify that movement participation be understood as ideologically structured contentious action; that is,

such ideologies must be framed as expressing contention with authority – a concept I define more fully below. For example, I classify Isaac’s assertion that homesteading is a way to restore personal freedom by replacing socially governed systems with home-based systems as an ideological, contentious account. Evan’s claim that his hunting, which he sees as a homesteading activity, is a spiritual pursuit where he communes with nature is ideological in a broad understanding of ideology as a belief system, but is not a contentious account.

Here, I deliberately choose to focus on ideological accounts rather than the widely-used concept of *frames* within social movement literature. I argue that frame theory evolved with, and is best suited to explain, highly organized movements that focus on a single or narrow set of issues. Frame theory conceptualizes frames as interpretive packages and frameworks – a particular version of events – that movement organizations and activists self-consciously promote in order to mobilize recruits and achieve goals (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Researchers that apply frame theory analyze the way in which organizational or movement frames and individual frames come to “align,” emphasizing a process of organizational marketing of frames intended to resonate with individual ideological perspectives prior to mobilization (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986). While ideologies refer to a coherent “system of meaning that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting and resisting social change” (Oliver and Johnston 2000: 43), frames are instead particular perspectives on some phenomena in which certain aspects of ideologies are invoked and applied. Ideologies can encompass frames, but are more than a single frame.

In this study, I am interested in the conditions under which people come to explain their lifestyles ideologically – in stories, explanations, and descriptions of their lives, rather than

single lens. While these accounts incorporate frames – in fact, I argue that participants shared a frame in which they explained their homesteading as an effort to “opt out” of the systems they found problematic – the concept of ideological accounts is a better conceptual fit for this study generally than that of frames. I follow Oliver and Johnston (2000) in their critique that frames, while an incredibly useful and productive concept, are used to do too much analytically within social movement studies and have consequently become an imprecise and catch-all concept, widely substituted for a number of theoretical tools that would provide stronger analyses. Like Oliver and Johnson (2000), I argue that the concepts of ideologies, accounts, and frames are most powerful when used in conjunction with, yet clearly distinguished from, one another. In this proposed framework, I seek to unpack the *accounts* participants offer for their lifestyles, and in so doing determine the extent to which these accounts are cast *ideologically*, and what *frames* are invoked within accounts to enable participants to explain their lifestyles as contentious action.

When I define lifestyle movements as those who account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action, I use Snow’s (2004) definition of contention as “collective challenges to systems of authority” (3). These “systems of authority” include any “recognized seat of decisions, regulations, procedures, and guidelines” or the “values, beliefs, and conceptualizations” that undergird or extend from those seats (Snow 2004:12). Concretely, this can include institutions ranging from government entities to corporations, associations to churches, the legal system to the medicinal system, to cultural systems. Additionally, Snow (2004) conceptualizes “collective challenges” to include both direct and indirect challenges:

Direct challenges include straightforward, undisguised, overt appeals and demands, such that the targeted authorities are aware of both the claims and their carriers; indirect challenges are those that are either covert and/or ambiguous – covert in terms of the action and its carrier, and ambiguous in terms of the action and the claims – or that seek to divest themselves of the authority by escaping it.

In this, I deliberately seek to expand the notion of contention beyond the narrow understanding proposed by Haenfler et al. (2012) of lifestyle movements as efforts to achieve “social change.” Focusing on contentious ideologies more broadly accommodates expressive` challenges in which the emphasis of participants may not be clear goals, may be prefigurative strategies (Breines 1989), or may be indirect goals such as collective escape – in which participants seek to protest current systems by exiting them as occurs in communal movements, separatist movements, or religious cults (Snow 2004; Kanter 1973). Additionally, a focus on contentious ideologies rather than the achievement of social change avoids the assumption of that participants primarily understand themselves to be instruments of change, as research has repeatedly shown that some participants of movements account for their participation in more expressive, rather than instrumental, terms (Gusfield 1963; Touraine 1985; Jasper 1997; Grigsby 2004). Such a broad perspective of contention better aligns with the efforts to expand the scope of movements that inspired the conceptualization of “lifestyle movements” in the first place.

Understanding participation in lifestyle movements as the use of contentious ideological accounts enables us to set criteria for participation in a particularly individualized movement; the adoption of certain accounts does not rely on formal organizational affiliation. When Haenfler et al. (2012) propose that lifestyle movements are those which “consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change,” they reify the “movement” to implicitly assert that lifestyle movements are formally organized, cohesive collective actors to which individuals may affiliate. This framing suggests that we could distinguish participants from non-participants by assessing who is connected to formal aspects of “the movement” through organizations or networks. While this conceptualization is intuitive given the dominant conception of movements, it belies the nature of lifestyle movements – as

theorized by Haenfer et al. (2012) – as made up of loose networks of individuals with little or weak connections to organizations or other participants. Within lifestyle movements, people may connect only through jointly consumed media that gives them shared understandings and a subjective, imagined sense of community. What is most theoretically interesting and useful about the idea of lifestyle movements is that collective action has become particularly individualized, such that the best definition of a lifestyle movement would be from the perspective of an individual in order to capture who would be considered part of this network, and who would not.

Lastly, this framework allows for participation that is private and expressive in nature. When Haenfler and colleague's (2012) propose that participants “consciously and actively promote” the lifestyle, they narrow participants to those involved in the public sphere and in so doing effectively sweep aside those who adopt lifestyle behaviors in the context of larger ideologies and yet do not actively seek to persuade others to adopt the lifestyle. Many participants care less about spreading the lifestyle than committing to it themselves. Others fit in a grey area in which they do not actively try to convince those in their networks, but may hope to indirectly influence people through “modeling” the ideal lifestyle and hoping others follow their example. For example, Powell (1992) found that vegetarians she surveyed hoped others would follow the example they set, but did not actively seek to promote the lifestyle. I propose that the extent to which one seeks to promote the lifestyle – or more accurately, claim to try to convince others to adopt certain behaviors – is an interesting dimension of participation, but not a critical criterion in defining who participates and who does not.

In short, I propose that participation in a lifestyle movement is defined by the degree to which one accounts for one's lifestyle using contentious ideologies. This definition better

reflects the theoretical attributes of lifestyle movements than does Haenfler et al.'s (2012) conceptualization. Moreover, this definition operationalizes participation in a way that can be empirically studied when neither organizational affiliation, public action, nor specific practices can be used to establish the bounds around who is included in the movement and who is not. Additionally, focusing on a broad understanding of contention allows for expressive and private movement participation. Lastly, this definition allows for degrees of participation and ideological structuring, establishing participation as a spectrum rather than a binary. As Zald (2000) clarifies,

Ideological concerns may be manifested in elaborate, relatively coherent, and integrated systems of beliefs that have long histories and are widespread in a civilization, or they may be manifested in catch-phrases and metaphors that have mainly local resonance. Cadres and leaders of social movements are more likely to have more developed and coherent systems of beliefs than casual adherents, sympathizers, and by-stander publics" (3-4).

In other words, people can heavily draw on ideological accounts in their narratives of why they engage in homesteading practices, or they can mention them sparingly, incoherently, or not at all. The analysis of this dissertation will both use and substantiate the notion of participation as a continuum.

Outlooks

Whereas the last section examined how to define degrees of participation, in the following sections I propose two conceptual tools to analyze why and how people came to adopt ideological accounts. These tools provide lenses through which to analyze interviewees' perspectives and their articulation of their identities in order to better understand how each of these narratives help to explain why people adopt contentious ideological accounts for their lifestyle. Specifically, I offer the concepts of *outlooks* and *vocabularies of motives* as tools

through which to examine discursive elements in interviews that offer insight into the interviewee's adoption of ideological accounts of the homesteading lifestyle.

I define outlooks as those descriptions of one's worldview and emotions that are not incorporated into the accounts participants gave for their homesteading. Whereas accounts include the rationales and stories that people espouse – the stories they *want* to give to themselves and others to explain their actions – outlooks are those perspectives and feelings that develop in interviews outside of one's account of their homesteading practices. I argue that scholars should analyze interviews with this distinction in mind – examining the relationship between parts of the interview that are claimed as part of one's motive to participate in the lifestyle movement, and the thoughts and feelings described throughout the interview that are unclaimed in these stories. This focus shifts the analysis from identifying motives in interviews to identifying *explanations* of one's motives, and how these explanations intersect with or diverge from the other stories, perspectives, and emotions participants raised in the interview.

In the notion of outlooks, I build on the methodological work of Allison Pugh (2013), who illuminates the unique advantages of interview data by theorizing the kinds of information only available within interviews. In contrast to those who argue that interview data is inherently problematic because interviewees offer contradictory accounts that don't necessarily reflect their actual behaviors (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), Pugh (2013) argues that interviewers should “expect, and use analytically – rather than strive to ‘solve theoretically’ – the contradictory cultural accounts that our research subject evince.” In other words, these discrepancies should be explored rather than decried as imperfect representations of action, as they provide insight into many cultural and identity-based processes. In addition to the *honorable* accounts – those interviews in which interviewees “frame their answers to present themselves in the most

admirable light” – Pugh (2013) argues that interviewers can discern “language and non-verbal cues ... that convey the frameworks through which [interviewees] view the world.” These frameworks may or may not align with their honorable accounts and can be discerned through analyzing not only language but the “way people give them.” Additionally, interviewers can analyze for respondents’ “emotional landscape” through “verbal missteps ... non-verbal cues ... logical contradictions that elude resolution, potent silences, or when an interviewee’s normally clear and concise language devolves into convoluted or halting syntax.” Lastly, interviews can offer information on meta-feelings, or how we feel about how we feel. I use all of these forms of information in analyzing interviews for outlooks – the ways that interviewees revealed perspectives and emotions that they expressed in intentional, unintentional, indirect, and nonverbal ways that were not necessarily included in the “honorable” accounts they offered for their homesteading, the stories of their lives, and how they explained their identities.

Vocabularies of Motive

Lastly, I propose a final conceptual tool for the analysis of interviews – *vocabularies of motives*. Vocabularies of motive are the socially learned and shared vocabularies that people use to describe, explain, or justify the motives or intentions of their actions. C. Wright Mills (1940) proposed this concept to call attention to the notion that motives are sociological – they are shared ways of accounting for our actions, tailored to different audiences and situational contexts. Vocabularies of motives are key ways that individuals articulate their identities, explaining their intentions and decisions through the lens of particular values, goals, commitments, cultures or personal characteristics. Whereas accounts are the elaborated stories offered for specific conduct, vocabularies of motive are the patterns in the recurring words, phrases, logics, and ideas from which participants draw in many of their accounts. I argue that

an analysis of vocabularies of motive offers a more accurate picture of participants' shared identities within lifestyle movements when used in conjunction with the more traditional concept of collective identity, and thus offer this analytic tool as a methodological contribution to the field of movements.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) define collective identity as “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly” (285). Often formed around structurally-based ascriptive characteristics or culturally-based bonds of shared meaning, collective identities are those we share based on perceived commonalities (Owens et al. 2010). People join movements to act on behalf of, for the benefit of, or to express solidarity with the groups in which they are embedded (Simon et al. 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Melucci 1989; Fireman and Gamson 1979). Collective identities thus inspire movement participation when a collective identity forms around a movement and individuals see themselves as part of that group (Snow and McAdam 2000; Diani 1992). As Holland (2008) writes, a movement identity is “participants' shared sense of the movement as a collective actor – as a dynamic force for change – that they identify with and are inspired to support in their own actions” (97). Although many movements draw on pre-existing collective identities – for example, racial or immigrant groups, nationalities, occupational groups – many identities are constructed and come into being through movements, as for example feminists or environmentalists (Jasper 1997; Roscigno and Danaher 2001).

In a particularly individualized movement in which personal identity work is a crucial part of movement participation and the sense of a movement is particularly subjective due to loose organization and minimal interaction, an analysis of vocabularies of motive offers distinct

advantages over a sole focus on collective identity. Vocabularies of motive occupy a middle space between personal and collective identity; they are not necessarily related to one's self-identified groups or communities, yet they constitute shared aspects of identity, indicative of the cultures into which one has been socialized and belongs. Owens et al. (2010) argue that individual identities are always social in origin, arising from internalized perceptions of how we believe others see us and using relational descriptors in which people describe themselves in reference to others. I add to this assertion that the shared aspects of our individual identities extend beyond our self-concepts to include aspects of our self-presentation of which we are not necessary aware, or which we would include in self-descriptions – such as the types of vocabularies we use to explain our motivations.

A focus on the articulation of identity as a narrative – the stories we offer to ourselves and others to explain who we are – enables us to see similarities among otherwise diverse groups of people. Vocabularies of motive offer one lens through which we can study the socially-constructed shared components of personal identities among individuals who would claim very different collective and personal identities. For example, while interviewees in this study appeared to be an astoundingly diverse group, they tended to explain their behavior in similar ways. This discovery of underlying similarities in how people perceived themselves was initially surprising, given a group that ascribed to opposite and often contradictory poles of the political spectrum, religious affiliation, class, and location. While they categorized themselves with profoundly different labels, and told me they belonged to social groups that were unlikely to ever cross paths, they explained the course of their lives and decisions as functions of their independence and conscientiousness (in nuanced ways I discuss at length in chapter three). Thus, while they did not necessarily share a collective identity prior to adopting the

homesteading lifestyle, they did share vocabularies of motive. The concept of vocabularies of motive thus calls attention to the benefits of examining identity as process, rather than more static characteristics or groupings.

This is not to deny that collective identity plays a role in this analysis, or that the concept of collective identity is not an incredibly insightful and explanatory concept within social movements. Participants still claimed a number of related and overlapping collective movement identities – Urban Homesteader, Prepper, Off-the-Grid, Farmer, Local Food movement, Survivalist – and in the final chapter I examine the role of these identities in reaffirming the ideological structuring of one's lifestyle. Yet, these collective identities are best understood in the intersections with personal identity work, as revealed through vocabularies of motive. Combining an analysis of vocabularies of motive and collective identity thus provided a richer understanding of movement participation than a singular focus on collective identity.

In short, I contend that this framework offers analytical tools particularly well-suited for and adapted to lifestyle movements. Using ideological accounts as the criteria for participation in lifestyle movements is best able to set the bounds around who is in the movement (and who is not) in an expressive, private movement in which neither public action nor organizational affiliation can set these bounds. Moreover, ideological accounts better capture the ongoing work of lifestyle activism than does the more limited concept of a frame. Outlooks provide us a way to analyze emotions and perspectives which are expressed but unclaimed in our accounts. Lastly, vocabularies of motive provide a tool that is particularly well-suited to analyze the intersection between personal and collective identity in an individualized movement in which personal identity work is crucial. Each of these tools consistently apply the same theoretical lens of a focus on narratives and stories. Vocabularies of motives are stories of the self, accounts are

the stories we offer to explain our homesteading lifestyle, and outlooks are the perspectives and emotions revealed through the stories of our lives. Consequently, I argue that this framework best leverages interview data as well.

Methods

In this project, I set out to better understand broadly why people participate in lifestyle movements. Informed by the theoretical discussion above, my formal orienting research question is: *How do people come to account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action?* In my attempt to answer this question, I use homesteading as a particularly clear example of a lifestyle movement and use in-depth, open-ended interviews with those who engage in the homesteading lifestyle to analyze the conditions under which people come to account for their lifestyles ideologically. As my goal is to generalize to a process rather than population – *how* individuals come to account for the lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action – a case study was the most ideal research method (Small 2009; Becker 1990; Mitchell 1983). In that the homesteading movement is an example of a lifestyle movement in its most articulated form, I followed the principle that cases should be chosen in which the process I seek to understand is clearest (Small 2004; Yin 2002, Schudson 1992).

This dissertation is based on in-depth, open-ended interviews with a purposive sample of 49 individuals who engage in homesteading practices, gathered over 39 interviews – eight interviews were with couples, and one interview was with a couple and their adult daughter. I sampled from participants of the lifestyle more broadly, who used a diverse array of accounts to explain why they did so, and then used this variation to understand the patterns in how people come to explain their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action. This is a distinct approach from most studies of participation, which seek to discern what distinguishes those who

participate in certain actions (such as protest) from those who don't. As I argue above, within lifestyle movements one may participate in the action – homesteading – without espousing contentious ideologies. This question and method does not seek to understand who engages in homesteading behaviors versus those who do not, but rather who believes these actions carry ideological weight.

In practice, I recruited individuals based on their subjective self-identification with the homesteading lifestyle rather than my own categorization of their practices and daily habits. All of my recruitment materials explained that I was looking for individuals “who participate in homesteading practices,” which I defined broadly as “voluntary actions that increase the self-sufficiency of a household by replacing consumption with home production.” While few interviewees called themselves “homesteaders,” as doing so to them made an erroneous claim that they were entirely self-sufficient, they all held up the homesteading lifestyle as the ideal – the model lifestyle they sought to progressively move toward. As Lucky – an organizer of a local “Earthskills” gathering – tells me, “I don’t know that I can claim to be a full-on homesteader. But I do some things that homesteaders would do.” Those who responded to my recruitment message, as well as the individuals referred to the project, varied widely in the actual practices they considered homesteading. Some were small-time farmers with extensive gardens and livestock. Others were primarily dreamers, imagining the things they would someday do but currently merely planning and researching projects, such as how to create natural refrigerators. Most participants engaged in some form of gardening or “putting up” food (preserving food oneself through freezing, fermenting, dehydrating, canning, etc.); others focused on home production of crafts and products (such as soap, clothing, and furniture); and some sought to home produce utilities such as water and electricity. My participants ranged from Rick, who

claimed to have built the first straw bale house in his home state and lived primarily off grid on 10 acres, to Emily, a student who had recently acquired three chickens to produce their own eggs in their backyard in town. While the scale of their endeavors and actual practices were diverse, what united each of them was that *they* considered what they were doing as engaging with homesteading practices.

To emphasize what is of theoretical interest about lifestyle movements – that many participants act individually and privately - I constructed a purposive sample that sought to capture those participants who act primarily on their own in the private sphere. I first recruited individuals who were more publicly engaged as leaders or members of homesteading organizations. Such publicly engaged individuals were the most accessible entries into the broader network of Homesteaders, and were necessary to adequately represent the spectrum of private to public activity of participants of lifestyle movement. In this initial step, I intentionally sought organizations that represented both left and right-leaning ideologies, as well as organizations with no discernible ideological orientation, to diversify my sample ideologically. After recruiting these initial “seeds” from organizations as well as personal contacts, I deliberately focused on referral-based sampling in an effort to reach more isolated participants. I sought only one referral from each interviewee, contacting referred individuals one at a time until one person agreed to participate in the study (this was, with one exception, always the first person contacted). I sampled through such “long chains” in an attempt to capture individuals who are increasingly distant from organizations and thus more likely to be acting privately. This method was successful in recruiting a diverse range of participants in terms of the extent to which their homesteading efforts were private or public. I interviewed both Dan and Xander,

who founded a homesteading and “Prepper” group, respectively, as well as David, who told me he had never met another person face-to-face who engaged in homesteading activities.

As intended, this method ensured that there was variation in the degree to which participants explained their engagement with the homesteading lifestyle ideologically. Participants relied on ideological accounts more or less frequently, elaborated these accounts to different extents, articulated them more or less coherently, and differed on how important they claimed such accounts were to their own motivations to homestead. This means that some interviewees did primarily rely on non-ideological accounts – they explained, for example, that they participated in homesteading because they enjoyed it, it saved them money, or it was simply something they had always done. However, not a single interviewee failed to, at some point, reference an ideological reason to account for their homesteading. I believe that this was an artifact of my recruitment strategy that asked people to reply if they engaged in “homesteading” practices. By labeling these practices as part of a *lifestyle*, as opposed to recruiting solely on practices (e.g. “I’m looking for people who make their own jelly”), I believe the study attracted participants who understood their practices as an attempt to deliberately participate in a lifestyle in part due to what they understood that lifestyle to *mean*.

Additionally, this recruitment strategy was successful in creating a sample with a fantastically diverse range of espoused motives. I had interviewees who homesteaded in preparation of the hard times they thought would precipitate the second coming of Christ, to reduce their carbon footprint and live more “lightly” on the earth, to create for themselves a buffer from recessions and reduce their dependence on others for work, to participate in the local foods movement and sustainable agriculture, and as a way to commune with God’s creation. In this study, I discovered that homesteading is a loose, umbrella movement under which multiple

lifestyle movement collective identities converged. As I discuss more in depth in chapter four, while some participants did identify as homesteaders broadly, others identified – to different extents, some partially, and some with multiple – of the following identities:

- Urban Homesteaders – those who sought to make small plots in urban spaces as productive as possible, often for environmental reasons.
- Off-Grid: those who sought to remove themselves primarily from utility grids, such as electrical grids or water, most often as an effort to increase their sense of control and security.
- Prepper: those who seek to prepare for potentially dire times or disasters through learning homesteading skills as well as stocking useful goods/foods.
- Eco-Homesteading: A variation on homesteading that focuses primarily on environmental reasons.
- Farmsteading: Those who had small farms, produced primarily for their own families, but also sought to participate in the local foods movement.
- Primitive Skills/Survivalist movements: those who seek to learn basic survival skills, such as making a fire without matches.
- Homeschooling – For some, homemaking as a vocation was inextricably tied with their efforts to control the education and the environments of their own children; these participants often used homesteading practices as educational tools.

In addition to these lifestyle movement collective identities, some participants saw their homesteading as an extension in their involvement in the local foods movement, sustainable agriculture movement, or environmentalism; their conservative politics and status as a “patriot”; non-movement ideological identities, such as their Christian faith; or simply saw homesteading as a hobby or a way to fashion themselves as cool, “hip” people. This incredible diversity was in some ways unsurprising, as journalistic work on similar movements – for example, Matchar’s (2013) book on what she terms the “new domesticity” and Nick Rosen’s (2012) book on individuals living “off the grid” also found that participants ranged from right-wing Survivalists to ultra-granola hippie types. Yet, I was surprised by the extent to which the conservative/liberal

political binary was deconstructed within the sample; I interviewed people who lived in intentional communities who discussed the apocalypse and their empathy for the tea party's desire to radically shake up politics, people who expressed conservative political ideologies while preaching the benefits of homebirth, and an enormous population of Independents and Libertarians who felt they could not be labeled.

Apart from living in a shared geographic location, the sample was incredibly diverse in many demographic dimensions as well. The vast majority of these interviewees lived in the Triangle Area, within an hour radius of the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metropolitan area, known for its highly educated workforce due to the presence of multiple universities and research and tech companies. This location was an apt area to study homesteading, given a vibrant culture and institutional network around homesteading activities. It was relatively easy for me to recruit individuals to the study from this area, and most of the time I had more volunteers than were needed for the study. In three cases, I was referred to individuals outside of the area who were a particularly good fit for the study, and so conducted phone interviews with them. I interviewed 25 men and 24 women, though I made no intentional attempt to balance the sample based on sex. Of the interviews in which I was told ages directly, my youngest interviewee was 21 and my oldest was 79. I interviewed people who told me they grew up as multi-millionaires to those who grew up poor. I spoke to PhDs and those who held associate degrees, although to my knowledge all interviewees held some form of degree beyond high school. The one dimension that was noticeably uniform, holding little if any diversity, was race and ethnicity. I did not ask how participants self-identified, but all appeared to be white. While this study does not have the capacity to explore the intersection of race and homesteading (or

possibly race and lifestyle movements), this is an important avenue that should be explored in future research.

I used the “sequential interviewing” method to determine how many interviews to conduct (Small 2009). In this method, the goal is to conduct the number of interviews needed to achieve “saturation.” The sample and guide were not fully determined beforehand, but rather questions changed sequentially to reflect information learned in previous interviews, with the number and distribution of interviews dependent on insights developed along the way. With each new case (interviewee), the goal was twofold. First, to attempt to replicate findings of previous cases. Second, to test hypotheses by selecting interviewees (cases) where, based on one's theory, one would expect different rather than replicated findings. The ultimate goal was to continue interviewing people until the interviews either replicated findings or systematically differed as expected (Small 2009). According to Small (2009), “saturation” has been achieved at the point in which one can account for each case. For this project, I felt that I reached saturation after 39 interviews with 49 individuals, comprising 71.5 hours of interviewing (an average of almost two hours per interview, with a range of 1-3 hours) over the course of two years. I conducted initial pilot interviews in August of 2013, and then regularly conducted interviews from February 2014 to May of 2015, directing these interviews toward those individuals and questions that best filled gaps in my understanding and argument.

When I began interviews, I broadly wanted to understand how participants explained why they engage in homesteading practices, and how they came to do so. I aimed to follow inductive interviewing best practices to draw out these discussions in ways that minimized my own preconceived notions; I sought to let the interviewee direct the conversation as much as possible. At the beginning of the interview, I began with a very broad “Tell me about yourself.” I would

then follow up on subjects and comments that arose in the interview for, on average, the next one and a half to two hours. To do so, I would use prompts such as, “Can you tell me more about _____?” and “What do you mean when you say _____?” My goal in conducting interviews in this fashion was to minimize my own influence as a researcher in the story that they told. If, at the end of the interview, key themes had not surfaced, I then directed the conversation to more specific topics that didn’t necessarily follow from previous discussions. In broad strokes, for each interview I aimed to discuss how they came to homestead; in what homesteading practices they engaged and for how long; how they understood their personal and collective identities; their interaction with others and organizational involvement; perceived outcomes or changes influenced by their homesteading practices; and their involvement, if any, in other forms of activism. For these questions, in analysis I paid careful attention to what subjects did not appear throughout the evolution of a more organic conversation, as this suggests that these topics were less central to participants’ own accounts and understanding of homesteading.

As anticipated, this inductive strategy initially yielded surprising findings. For example, I had expected that interviewees would believe that social change was accomplished through individual change – that they would think that their actions, when combined with other individuals, would “change the world.” This preconceived notion was grounded in my reading of homesteading books and how-to manuals in preparation for this project. For example, Tullock’s (2009) *The New American Homestead* launches by asking the reader, “Think the world’s problems – climate change, extinction, poverty, hunger – are too large to be affected by individual action? Think again” (6). Similarly, the authors of *Radical Homemakers* describe the movement at “homemaking as a vocation for saving family, community, and the planet” (Hayes 2010: 1). Yet, I quickly discovered that interviewees’ perspective of their own impact was a

very complex issue, and differed (often substantially) from one part of the interview to the next. While I discuss this pattern much more in-depth in later parts of this dissertation, what I generally discovered was that participants answered this question in one way if I asked them directly about their motivations – (e.g. “Why do you homestead?”) than in responses to questions about the progression of their lives (e.g. How did you come to begin homesteading?”).

True to the inductive method, my theoretical framework was developed as I conducted research, and evolved over time as I better understood the movement. Upon discovering discrepancies between how interviewees explained their homesteading practices and the way they discussed their view of the world, I discerned that many of the outlooks offered when participants were telling me the stories of their lives were contradictory to the accounts they presented when I directly asked them why they participated in homesteading practices. It was this distinction, discovered in interviews, that prompted me to develop and apply the theoretical framework I proposed above. To explore and leverage this discrepancy, I then deliberately sought to separate questions in which I elicited accounts from more open-ended questions asking interviewees to elaborate their backgrounds and perspectives. To elicit accounts, my main tool was to ask “why” they participated in homesteading practices, deliberately prompting them to provide me their rationale. In other parts of the interview, I aimed to ask only follow-up questions (e.g. “Tell me more.” “What happened next?”) and sought to avoid account-eliciting questions. In analysis, I then paid careful attention to the prompting question, seeking to uncover patterns in how participants responded to account-eliciting questions and other types of questions. I found clear patterns in this analysis, to be discussed at length in this dissertation; in particular, negative, pessimistic outlooks appeared throughout questions that did not seek to elicit accounts, but were then de-emphasized, contradicted, or disavowed in accounts.

I analyzed interviews as they occurred, inductively coding and writing evolving memos so that analysis could inform future interviews (Small 2009; Charmaz 2006). After conducting the interview, I would write a participant-observation style introduction where I introduced the setting and wrote my initial impressions of the interview. After interviews were transcribed, I analyzed them as soon as possible so that such analysis could orient future interviews. While listening to the audio, I used Atlas Ti to code interviews. I began with an inductive form of open coding – extracting codes from raw data to create a coding scheme (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For these early codes, I aimed to stay as close as possible to the language or phrasing used by participants (e.g. “knowing where food comes from”), general themes (e.g. “Dependence”), or types of discussions I wanted to return to later for comparative analysis (e.g. discussions of family, occupation). From such codes, concepts were interpretively constructed from the data, and these concepts progressively reduced to more and more abstract categorizations. For example, over time it became apparent that discussions of homesteading as “knowing where food comes from,” “security,” and discussions of “dependence” as an inherently negative characteristic were all part of a broader explanation of homesteading as an effort to restore individual control in an uncertain world.

To move from coding to higher levels of analysis, I used a process of iterative memo-writing. After coding, I wrote extensive notes for each interview organized by code as well as an overarching summary. Interview summaries were used to recall the arch and basic stories of different participants, and to contextualize conversations and quotes. After the interview, I merged the sections under each code into a memo on that code, which evolved over time as my understanding deepened. For example, I merged several codes into longer memos on perceptions of efficacy, discussions of identity, or how people came to homestead; these memos

were then combined into chapters. When I entered the writing stage, I continued to listen to interviews to keep data fresh and alive; interviews were listened to at least three times each. Through all of these processes, I built an emergent analysis.

Within analysis, my main analytic task was to discern to what extent such accounts were ideological and contentious, grounded in broader belief systems that expressed contention with authority. For example, the accounts offered ranged from participants who told me they engaged in homesteading as an effort to diminish the power of an overextended government (strongly ideological), to those who homesteaded in part because they felt it to be healthier and in part as a form of protest against agricultural corporations (ideological), to those who engaged in homesteading practices because they found it enjoyable and knew others that also did so (non-ideological). In this coding process, I sought to situate interviews on an ideological spectrum rather than a categorical analysis. I paid careful attention to how often they brought up and emphasized ideological accounts, as well as how coherent, salient, and articulate the ideology. As discussed above, my other primarily analytic tasks were to analyze: (1) participants' outlooks – looking for emergent patterns in worldviews and emotions expressed in the stories of interviewees' lives, whether or not these were claimed in homesteading accounts; and (2) vocabularies of motives – looking for patterns in how people explained their decisions and intentions, including but not limited to their decision to homestead.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I ought to reflect on the influences of my own identity and perspective in order to minimize, leverage, and self-analyze such influences. This project grew out of my own interest and participation in homesteading activities; my husband and I garden, compost, hunt, ferment, and have plans for permaculture landscaping and rain barrels. During interviews, I sought to be unassertive and unobtrusive with this connection,

given that doing so can color the way participants interact with a researcher, the type of data they reveal, and the expectations they hold for research findings (Cherry et al. 2011). However, I was honest about my involvement when interviewees directly asked me that information in an attempt to validate my identity and interest (Cherry et al. 2011). I tried to be aware of the extent to which I empathize with the movement participants and on some level, find such work “right,” good, or interesting. Indeed, many of my early expectations were influenced by my assumption that people who engaged in homesteading practices did so for similar reasons to my own; in this, I was mistaken, and was taken aback by the diversity I encountered. Additionally, I was struck by the pessimistic tenor of interviews in large part because this was something that I did not recognize or want to admit in my own story of coming to homestead.

There were pieces of my identity, some assumed on the part of interviewees, that I do believe shaped interviews. As a graduate student in sociology from UNC, interviewees tended to assume that I was liberal on the political spectrum and knew that I was well-educated. For those interviewees who were liberal, this meant that some ideas and ideologies were left unexplained and undefended that I believe in other contexts would have been more elaborated. In interviews, a few times I had to clarify, “Assume I know nothing about x, and tell me what you mean...” because it was clear that these assumptions of what I already “knew” were stopping interviewees from elaborating their own beliefs. For those who were more conservative, my assumed beliefs were sometimes challenged; for example, in one instance, I was combatively asked to defend my own beliefs on gun rights, despite the fact that I had offered no thoughts on this subject before the question. Additionally, I believe that my status as a white, young woman in the Triangle area meant that other young, white adults saw me as part of their cultural community and were hesitant to admit to some beliefs because they assumed I held certain values. For example, one

interviewee told me he saw me as a “peer” and so didn’t want to admit that he homesteaded in part because it made him feel good about himself, despite the fact that he didn’t think it affected change. In all of these influences, I sought to be intentional and self-reflective. I aimed to compensate for them in interviews by asking interviewees to elaborate when I thought they might not due to assumed pieces of my identity, and to the best of my ability I withheld my own perspectives during interviews to minimize these assumptions.

Outline of Dissertation

To reiterate, the orienting research question for this dissertation is *how people come to account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action*. I argue that people come to adopt such accounts when they perform “identity work” through restoring participants’ espoused vocabularies of motives in the face of outlooks and emotions that threaten or undermine them. In the following, I offer a brief roadmap to the rest of the dissertation to show how each chapter contributes toward this overarching claim.

In chapter three, I show that participants are most likely to account for their lifestyles ideologically when they come to feel that they are a part of meaningless or unstable systems, yet powerless to change them. The majority of participants described the events of their lives leading up to their homesteading activities in negative terms – they felt dissatisfied and disheartened that their lives did not feel meaningful, and/or felt their current situations were precarious and their future no longer secure. In these experiences, participants came to feel that their lives were bound up in the social cultures or systems they found problematic, beyond repair, and outside of their ability to change. This finding was unanticipated, as most research on movement participation finds that people are most likely to join movements when they have faith in their own ability to help effect positive social change. Yet this absence of efficacy, or even

optimism, in interviews was so widespread that it appeared not only to not impede participation, but actually to motivate it. This finding gave rise to the fundamental paradox that my research sought to resolve – how can pessimism and inefficacy motivate action rather than apathy?

In chapter four, I show how these negative emotions and perceptions contradict participants' sense of selves, using data to show that pessimism and inefficacy were viewed as problematic by my participants – something they simultaneously expressed and disavowed. Using the concept of vocabularies of motive, I argue that this pessimism and inefficacy undermined their identities because they contradicted the ways participants typically accounted for their actions to themselves and others. Specifically, participants used vocabularies of independence and conscientiousness throughout the interview to explain their lives and actions – vocabularies which are undermined by the belief that one is bound to intractable harmful or unstable systems; one cannot be conscientious if his/her life is governed by unethical systems, or independent if their future is determined by structures beyond their control. This contradiction creates an identity strain in which one's worldview and feelings are at odds with one's desired identity.

In chapter five, I propose an answer to the research question initially posed in this dissertation – *how participants come to explain their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action*. Building on the arguments constructed in the preceding chapters, I argue that participants adopt ideological contentious accounts for their lifestyles because they perform “identity work” for them by restoring their sense of identity. To make this case, I show how the content of ideological accounts resolve identity strains, as well as how participants use, learn, and incorporate these accounts into their identities reveals the centrality of ideologies to participants' motives to join the movement. First, I show how the content, ideas, and logics of

ideological accounts of homesteading enabled participants to recast their lifestyles in frames that better aligned with their vocabularies of motives, restoring their ability to claim their actions as driven by conscientiousness or independence. Specifically, the shared ideological frame of homesteading as an effort to “opt out” of problematic systems in an effort to either reduce compliance with or dependence on those systems helped participants to rationalize, minimize, or bypass their feelings of inefficacy and pessimism. Next, I argue that participants with the strongest ideological accounts were most likely to describe themselves as self-recruiting into homesteading after having read about it through books or online, showing that they adopted homesteading practices because they were drawn to – and, on some level, seeking – the ideas and ideologies of the lifestyle; moreover, they were most likely to consider themselves a part of ideological, rather than practice-based, identities, showing the centrality of ideological accounts to their identities. These two patterns reinforce the argument that participants adopted ideological accounts because they were needed to cope with an identity strain.

Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to a growing number of studies that seek to diversify the forms of movements studied beyond organizationally-mobilized, public confrontations with institutional political targets (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Haenfler et al. 2012; Snow 2004; Zald 2000). These scholars call attention to the way in which movement research has privileged the “contentious politics” (CP) perspective, an increasingly popular³ approach which examines the interactions between movements and other collective actors and institutions during periods of heightened conflict in social systems (Tilly 2008, 1998, 1978; Tarrow 1998; McAdam et al. 2001). The CP research agenda ambitiously aims to broaden

³ For example, in the early 1990s the term “contentious politics” populated 5970 citations in the Google Scholar database; in 2012-2013, the use of this term had ballooned to 19,400 scholarly references (Tarrow 2014: 1-2).

the study of movements to encompass those institutions with which movements interact – for example, political parties (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; McAdam and Kloos 2014) or the legal system (Goldsmith 2012; McCann 1994) – as well as forms of conflict from which movements grow and into which they transition, such as revolutions (Beissinger 2011; 2007), strikes, or terrorism. Despite this effort to broaden the study of movements, the CP theoretical framework and researchers who adopt it continue to define social movements more narrowly as organized, episodic, manifestly political, public interactions between claims makers and their targets (McAdam et al. 2001).

By studying new forms of social movement organization and strategy, as well as existing forms of contentious action that receive little scholarly attention, researchers have contributed a number of important theoretical insights into why people join movements more generally. In fact, some of the most widely used concepts to explain movement participation – collective identity, framing, emotions – were developed in part to accommodate the increasing emergence of forms of movements who sought to gain symbolic power over cultural narratives rather than material power over resources (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986; Jasper 2011). The study of these cultural and identity-based movements has shown that participation can be expressive (e.g. Jasper 1997; Cohen 1985; Jenkins 1983); that such expressive tactics may be used strategically (Bernstein and Olsen 2009; Bernstein 1997; Barnard 2011); and that participants can join movements in an effort to embody desired social arrangements (Breines 1989; Snow 2004). Moreover, scholars have worked to show that by extending the concept of *action* beyond episodic bursts of public political activity into contentious behavior that occurs within and targets various institutional settings (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), we better understand how these structures maintain activist collective identities,

ties, ideologies, and contentious claims during non-receptive political climates (Staggenborg 2005; Rupp and Taylor 1987; Taylor 1989).

More recently, by extending the conceptualization of collective action to accommodate the emergence of individualized, loosely networked contention, scholars have shown that people increasingly focus on personal consumption as their primary expression of citizenship (Shah et al. 2012); and that new forms of social media enable individuals to recruit their own networks, degrading the role of organizations in recruitment and possibly contributing to the displacement of collective action frames by enabling participants to personalize their own mix of “causes” introduced and expressed through media (Bennett 2012). Relatedly, by examining social movement behavior that is hidden from the public eye, researchers have shown how everyday behaviors extend activist commitments into daily life (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007; Portwood-Stacer 2010; Almanzar et al. 1998); serve to reinforce political commitments (Willis and Schor 2012); and function as sites of ideological socialization that provide entry points into movement behavior (Zald 2000). In all of this work, scholars expanded the theoretical concept of social movement to empirically study alternative forms of movements, and in doing so contributed theoretical insights that inform our understanding of participation in all movements.

In short, I argue that giving center stage to forms of social movements situated on the margins of academic study is a fruitful avenue for generating and extending movement theory. By studying movements in which certain features are accentuated – in the case of lifestyle movements, discursive, individualized activism manifesting in the private realm – these processes are magnified in a way that enables deeper understanding. Not only does this study offer methodical contributions by proposing a theoretical framework that can be applied widely, including but not limited to studies of movements, but my analysis elucidates dimensions of

movement behavior found in all movements – responding to social problems through everyday life and lifestyle changes. This study thus extends as well as deepens our understanding of social movements.

CHAPTER 2: PESSIMISM AND INEFFECTICACY

Heidi started and currently runs “the biggest primitive skills gathering in the country,” an event organized around learning skills such as friction fire and preserving wild geese. In addition, she manages a year-round school that offers skills classes in subjects like eco-homesteading, primitive skills, permaculture, radical homesteading and re-wilding. On her own seven-acre piece of property, Heidi gardens and cultivates permaculture landscaping, butchers meat for others, and works on restoring the forest around her home.

Heidi began her life on a more conventional path. After high school, she went to school for genetic engineering – which she describes as the fast track to material and mainstream success. In the midst of this venture, she tells me she “got hit by a car. And, then I quit school and I went traveling and hung out in various – and lived in various intentional communities in the states.” When I ask her to tell me more about the car wreck she says,

It just like totally made me reevaluate my life. And the whole like forward moving, toward like conventional success and more and more and more education. That just seems pretty empty to me. And so then I went traveling to go find out what seemed more viable to me.

Heidi dropped out of school to figure out what she wanted in life and then spent several years in what I came to think of as purpose-seeking ventures, intentional efforts to craft a meaningful life. She describes this as a process of shedding conventions and norms by experimenting with alternative lifestyles.

During this time in her life, Heidi says that she was a little “apocalyptic” in her “view point of like how things were going to go in the world.” She says that felt like “uncontrolled

growth" meant that "life as we know it [was] gonna change, drastically" and felt like our civilization would fall and that it would "important to prepare for that." While she tells me that at this point in her life she is no longer as concerned with collapse, she tells me that she is still opposed to "interest-based capitalism" and "rejects" a lot of things about the US government and culture. When I ask her to give me examples she tells me,

I think that interest-based capitalism is something that I have a lot of problems with and I think causes impoverishment and starvation and, and environmental destruction and catastrophe. I think that that's a big thing and I think, I think that like the whole strip mall aesthetic I find – I mean some of its aesthetic and some of it's like ethical. My rejections. Just the big business driven, lack of personal, lack of old-timey ways of doing things.

In general, Heidi has deep critiques of American culture and structures. And, she traces these critiques to the fundamental systems of our society – including, for example, capitalism. She accounts for her homesteading as an altruistic effort to use her lifestyle as an educational tool, empowering others to be able to remove themselves from such harmful systems, reducing their footprint, dependence on oil, and need to engage in the mainstream economy.

Earlier in her life, Heidi had engaged in activism in these issues, but no longer sees activism as a viable solution. She described herself as a "radical anarchist" in her twenties. Heidi was involved in some of the big protests of the 90s – such as the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle – which she says was a formative experience in shaping her worldview. While she would still call herself a "radical," she tells me "The whole like protesting thing is, I'm just, I feel pretty done with that. I did that a lot when I was younger and it just didn't seem like it did that much." When I ask her to tell me what she means by that, she explains that she "did not see change affected by [her] action. And in my life now I see much change affected by my action" through the skill-building education she offers and her personal relationships. Not only does she feel that activism is ineffective, but she tells me that activism is too costly – that

she knows people in jail for eco-terrorism, that it didn't allow her to support herself, and that is wasn't "sustainable" for her mental state and personal health. Today, she tells me, "I don't choose to spend a lot of time thinking about big picture politics these days either ... My philosophy [is that] I'm more focused on the community that's like right around me."

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In 2009, Neal ran for mayor of a small North Carolina town on a "homesteading platform," proposing initiatives like "the planting of apples, plums, peaches and pears up and down Main Street" so that people would "never go hungry for fruit." While he received a sizable third of the vote, he lost the election. In the campaign process, Neal says that he came to realize that there was a "food desert" downtown in his town and is now in the process of helping to start a food cooperative. On his own, he "urban homesteads" and gardens using permaculture design on his small yard in the middle of town; after our interview, he takes me on a tour of several berry bushes. He supports these efforts through running a grainery for local bakers, and is in the process of trying to start a grocery cooperative.

Dave's current life is a far cry from where he began; after high school, Neal went into the military and was deployed as a tank driver "on the front lines during Desert Storm." This experience, and in particular one harrowing battle, served as a turning point that led him to no longer "trust our system." In particular, this experience led him to view the US as wielding an iron fist "willy nilly" across the globe and intruding in matters in which we don't necessarily have a business. After he came back from his deployment, while battling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), during college he began "researching" the war and foreign affairs, which solidified his stance in opposition to US military policy.

After graduating from college and going into graphic and web design, Neal's mother died, which he credits as causing him to reevaluate his life and running the "rat race." Consequently, he left his job at IBM. After opening and starting to franchise a successful packing and shipping, the recession hit – abruptly and unexpectedly killing his business. He says that this experience led him to start looking at the "possibility of economic collapse." He is highly concerned about the national debt, and feels that there is no solution to this issue - except extreme measures which would lead to collapse. Neal believes that some sort of collapse will happen within his lifetime, and seeks to use homesteading as a way to "wean" himself off of this system and achieve self-sufficiency and security. Even Neal's political involvement reveal the extent to which he is resigned; his platform aimed to build up the self-sufficiency of his community for what he considers the probability of some sort of social or economic collapse.

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Both Neal and Heidi are pessimistic and resigned. They express deep concerns about the world around them, and at some point came to feel that they were personally enmeshed in troubling systems – the military apparatus, mainstream American culture, or capitalism. Yet, neither seems to believe that there are solutions to these issues – either of their own rendering or through conventional politics or activism. In these perceptions and emotions, Neal and Heidi were not alone; the majority of participants in this study felt that the problems about which they were concerned were likely to get worse, not better, and that there was little they could do to stop it. Moreover, these bleak outlooks and negative emotions were patterned. The more participants explained their lifestyles as embedded in, motivated by, and manifesting contentious belief systems, the stronger the pessimism and resignation. The more participants used non-ideological accounts to explain their homesteading practices (e.g. its "fun" or "cheaper"), and the less central

and articulated ideological accounts, the more likely they were to express hope that things were generally getting better and they were helping to bring about that change. Thus, not only do negativity and pessimism not *hinder* participation in a lifestyle movement, but they actually appear to *motivate* it. This suggests an intuitive paradox: how can pessimism and inefficacy motivate action rather than apathy?

This pessimism was most apparent, and in some cases, solely apparent, in participants' stories of their lives and unprompted general outlooks – rather than their accounts of why they engaged in homesteading. For example, this negativity might be apparent when I asked a participant when they started their first garden, but disappear when I ask why they started gardening. As a reminder, participants' accounts are those socially constructed and shared justifications that people use to explain behavior (in this case, homesteading) to one another (Scott and Lyman 1968). In contrast, a participants' outlook includes those perceptions and feelings that emerged in interviews when people told me the stories of their lives or general perceptions; they were largely unprompted discussions during which I was not calling on participants to account for their homesteading. Rather, outlooks emerged as we discussed their childhoods, jobs, or life transitions, delved into an opinion the participant expressed, or unpacked various topics in which I was not explicitly calling on them to justify or defend their behavior. As I discuss in the introduction, participants' outlooks and accounts often contradicted one another. This negativity and inefficacy infused the vast majority of interviews, in ways I will elaborate below, even in cases in which the way participants accounted for their homesteading efforts was quite optimistic and positive. This negativity was thus something that undergirded the perspective of participants, but not something they emphasized or even acknowledged in the

stories they tell themselves and others about their practices. Analyzing these contradictions yielded the primary puzzle, and then story, of this dissertation.

Because I am seeking to explain how participants come to adopt ideological accounts, in this chapter I focus analytically on the outlooks of those participants with strong ideological accounts. Specifically, I show that such participants: believed that fundamental societal systems were irreparably broken and that they were personally bound up in such systems, yet felt that they – as individuals or as part of a collective – had little power to influence these systems for the better, and consequently felt that the future was likely to be worse than the present. For purposes of comparison, I then close the chapter with an analysis of the notably more positive outlooks of those with non-ideological, or weakly ideological, accounts. This contrast is intended to substantiate the argument that discouraged outlooks are associated with ideological accounts.

The World According to Homesteaders: Pessimism and Broken Systems

Many interviewees described a world laden with problems, widespread and fundamental, and discussed these issues at some length – largely without my prompting. There was not a single interview in which interviewees did not discuss homesteading in relation to and as a response to some larger social or environmental problem, but the centrality and salience of perceived problems within interviews varied. The more participants understood their homesteading as part of a larger lifestyle movement and held the strongest ideological motivations for engaging in homesteading, the more clearly they articulated a pessimistic position in which fundamental systems of our society – for example, our economy, culture, political system, and infrastructure – were irreparably broken. In this section, I elaborate the

outlook of participants, emphasizing the way in which they envision the world as comprised of immense, impervious “systems” fraught with insurmountable troubles and challenges.

Participants expressed a generalized pessimism about the state of the world, a sense that problems are too many and too deep. While the problems discussed varied widely – from potential hyperinflation to the industrialized food system – they were undergirded by the perception that individuals were losing control over their own lives, including power over their well-being and ability to live a life in accordance with their own values. Rather, participants felt that human-created systems, and those that manage them, held increasing sway over the direction of their lives, and that the common people had lost control over the direction of such systems. These perceptions tended to group into two categories: (1) concern that we can no longer depend on the systems which influence our lives (ranging from the political system to food system to the electrical grid) for our own well-being and safety; and (2) concern that cultural and social systems are increasingly devoid of values and meaning, as well as increasingly powerful such that individuals are losing the ability to lead lives that align with their own belief systems and worldviews. As I argue below, for some this sense of institutional crisis was rooted in, or reinforced, by personal experience, while others offered startling anecdotes or facts encountered in the media or the experience of those they knew. Regardless of whether these problems were experienced directly or vicariously, many participants had come to feel that these problems threatened their individual lives, feeling that they were or could be personally impacted by these issues.

In the first of these concerns, participants expressed anxiety or frustration over the loss of individual autonomy, security, and control over their own well-being. They felt that systems, particularly the government and corporations, had amassed too much power and that individual

freedoms and rights were deteriorating as a result. As David – a young man preparing for eminent economic collapse – succinctly explains,

I mean they're... you're probably seeing a lot more people just fed up with like, I mean, just intervention from some things. I mean there's a lot of...there's a lot intervention from companies, there's a lot of intervention from the government that keeps people... I mean, I see the freedom in this country shrinking.

Lining up with David's analysis, many interviewees complained of the loss of gun rights, forced compliance to HOA rules or building codes, or compulsory conformity within the education system. Moreover, they were concerned about the overreaching influence of these systems because they deeply distrusted their stability and health, and felt that dependence on such structures was at their individual peril. Many felt that human-built systems were excessively interconnected, and that such centralization and interconnectedness had weakened resilience.

Blake – a young man who is currently striving to build a fully self-sustaining, off-grid homestead – tells me that "what homesteading is really about – is taking care of your own needs because we can't ever and never have been able to rely, and shouldn't ever rely, on any one entity to provide for us." When I ask him why, he replies,

Because if it's too centralized and that one system fails then everyone goes down with it. If we all have our own elements of security then we can all come together and rebuild together. But if we are all completely reliant critically, you know, on our water supply or our food supply – strictly things that allow us to survive – then, and that fails then we're all up shit's creek. So we, we just can't-- we can't be completely interdependent on one another. We have to have at least our foot in the door of sustainable lifestyles, you know, in order to regain some kind of local security.

In a similar vein, participants expressed concern about the amassed power of monopolies and interdependence of globalization, feeling that these trends resulted in what should be local problems mushrooming to national or global problems (e.g. a listeria outbreak spreading throughout the food system, an example offered by Xander). Lastly, participants felt that they could no longer trust systems to reliably keep them safe and healthy – that the government could

no longer keep them safe (Katrina was often offered as an example), the food system no longer protected their health (e.g. overly processed, dependence on pesticides, GMOs, and antibiotics), the economic system was no longer dependable after the recession, and medical systems could no longer be trusted (e.g. reliance on vaccinations, overly medicalized births).

In the second of these concerns, participants felt that individuals were losing their ability to lead value-driven lives due to the increasing dominance of cultural and social systems they considered to lack an ethical grounding. A central undercurrent to this type of concern was a perception that to participate in mainstream culture requires one to live a life devoid of meaning; they felt that conventional American lives are ruled by valueless systems (technology, consumerism, financial success). These participants described mainstream culture, and the expectations of a conventional career and family path, as overly-consumerist, materialistic, isolationist, shallow, and empty. Additionally, participants were concerned that their lives were shaped by unethical, valueless decisions of those in powerful positions, including political and corporate. Julia – a middle-aged woman who “unschools” her two teenagers and is passionate about drinking raw milk from her own goats – neatly sums up this perspective in the following, in which she is explaining to me how she came to study midwifery.

It really fits into this theme in my life of looking at alternative ways of doing things. ... I have noticed that the systems society has set up don't seem to work very well. Like I don't think that school is getting children very well-educated, I don't think that hospital birth really takes care of mothers and babies safely, I don't think that our food is produced in a very responsible, healthy way. I think Capitalism has kind of been soul-crushing for our country. I'm not a Communist, but I do think that the pursuit of money has really taken us far away from a moral center.

Similar to Julia, other interviewees told me that systems lacked a moral compass; for instance, they told me that politicians were in it for the money and made unethical decisions (e.g. around the drug war and military policy), that the corporate food system neglected the welfare of

animals, workers, and the environment, or that the education system taught kids the wrong values. To participate in conventional systems was by extension to comply with the unethical outcomes and origins of problematic systems.

While I find it useful to separate out these two categories analytically, these concerns were by no means mutually exclusive within interviews. Individuals often drew on several versions of these ideas, referring to multiple problems or issues throughout the interview. Often, they did so in ways that mixed seemingly contradictory political ideologies in surprising ways. For example, Isaac, a man whose concerns primarily aligned with conservative politics, who felt that the US was on the brink of civil war because the government had so far impinged on personal freedoms, also discussed how the overly-medicalized birthing system didn't allow him and his wife to birth children in a way that expressed their religious values. As Isaac tells me "if conservatives can be granola crunchers, we're about as close as you can get." On the other pole, Todd – who expressed more liberal concerns and lives in an intentional community in part to reduce his dependence on oil – tells me he "admires" the "radicalism" of the "tea party movement" and finds common ground with their disenchantment with "establishment candidates." While the pairing of such concerns at first blush appears surprising, they are underpinned by the idea that individuals should be able to live lives of their own making, including autonomy in decision-making and constructing lives based on their own worldviews.

Stories of Coming to the Movement

Not only did many participants express these concerns in abstract discussions about their worldviews, but when recounting the stories of their lives – *how* they came to adopt homesteading practices – they told me they had gone through experiences where they came to subjectively feel that that they were *personally* a part of these larger systems that they found

deeply problematic. In interviews, these experiences took the shape of personal stories, events in the news, the stories of those they knew personally, or startling anecdotes they had encountered through media. While many of these grievances were not personally experienced, these events and stories were subjectively experienced as personal, heightening their sense that their lives were or could be personally impacted by larger social and environmental crises. These experiences, and the feelings of meaninglessness or insecurity they engendered, were credited by participants as critical turning points within their stories of adopting the homesteading lifestyle. As described, many participants told me that they experienced some event or time period in which they decided they needed to make a change and switch paths; homesteading was that new path, often described as a radical departure from their previous lifestyles.

The timeline wasn't always clear in terms of whether these time periods engendered participants' critiques of systems or whether they affirmed perceptions participants already held. Some participants clearly experienced some pivotal event that created a new-found concern about a social or environmental problem. For example, Debbie – a stay-at-home mother who runs a religious nonprofit with her husband – described the seemingly mysterious health problems of her young child, sparking a period of self-education during which she started to feel that her family's health depended on a profit-driven food system that didn't have their well-being in mind. Mike and Angie – who run a small farm in addition to working full time – described watching their parents lose their retirement savings and starting to feel that their own economic future was bound up in a precarious economic system. Others described themselves as holding certain worldviews before these experiences, and then time periods in their lives made them feel like they had become a part of the systems they criticized. Randy, for example, described a period in which he looked around at the “McMansions” in his neighborhood and started to feel

like he was a part of the conventional, superficial culture he critiqued. Still others couldn't identify when they came to be concerned about certain systems. Regardless of this timeline, however, participants overwhelmingly told me that during what I came to think of as their "prior lives" because of the stark contrasts some participants would draw between their pre- and post-homesteading lives, they had personally and individually lost their sense of meaning and/or security because they realized they were deeply enmeshed in empty cultures or unstable systems. In these stories, they described these prior lives in overwhelmingly negative emotional terms – participants described coming to feel dissatisfied, empty, stressed, or anxious before embracing homesteading.

A Loss of Meaning

When discussing their lives before homesteading, many participants described periods in which they came to feel that their lives were unfulfilling, meaningless, or futile – that they had gotten caught up in empty conventions, experienced some life transition in which they were no longer sure how to live a life of significance, or were struggling to make a difference but feeling like their efforts were futile. In all of these stories, participants felt they had lost the meaning they wanted for their lives – whether they sought to lead a simple life, an impactful one, an alternative one, an adventurous one, or a self-directed and spontaneous one. These participants felt that their lives were falling short of their values.

For many, their sense of meaninglessness was centered on coming to feel that their jobs or careers were not self-actualizing – they were "rotting away" at unfulfilling desk jobs in which they felt like their lives were taken over by work that did not engage their interests and passions. Rick, for example, describes to me the way he felt while working at a media conglomerate before, as he tells it, "dropping out" of the corporate world.

... you're a cog in a major machine. ... It's just like you, you're not in the flow of like, you're down deep in this compartmentalized function. You know? And you're only a tiny, a little tiny subset of your humanness is being called upon essentially. Like your frontal cortex and your reasoning capacities and your number crunching, and your organizational skills, and how well you're able to move information, you know, through the email and how well you manage a meeting, Ok? It's like, that's like, you know, it's like this tiny little part of who, who I felt I was. And I just didn't, I just didn't feel human. It wasn't encompassing enough.

Others expressed a similar sentiment, describing to me their unhappiness working for bureaucracies, feeling that their individual creative expression was hampered (e.g. Xander).

Others were less articulate about the exact reasons they felt dissatisfied, but echoed the same emotions – feeling like their careers didn't matter, and consequently feeling dissatisfied during working hours. For example, when I ask Randy to tell me about his life before becoming a goat farmer, he says,

[My career in journalism] was just getting ragged around the edges, quite frankly. It was getting to the point where I didn't enjoy the work, I didn't enjoy sitting behind that desk. ... And, you know, it just got to the point where neither [my wife nor I] were really fulfilled by [our careers]. We didn't enjoy our jobs, and we didn't enjoy our lives. And [we were] working too many hours to actually have a life.

Randy was one of many who discussed jobs or other pursuits that made him feel unhappy because it was too stressful and all-encompassing – it didn't leave room for other pursuits.

For a small number, this sense of meaninglessness came suddenly as a result of a personal crisis – such as a divorce or car accident – which brought life into focus and caused them to re-evaluate the direction of their lives. These participants painted pictures of precise moments in which some unanticipated shock – a car wreck, a harrowing experience in war, or an illness – sparked a period of clarity and reassessment. For example, notice the way that Heidi and Neal, introduced to you in the beginning of this chapter, describe those exact moments in which they reconsidered their participation in empty cultures:

Heidi: [I was on the] fast track for genetic engineering, [planning to do] research on curing diseases and make a bunch of money. (We both laugh.) ... And then I got hit by a car... It just like totally made me reevaluate my life. And the whole like forward moving, toward like conventional success and more and more and more education. Like that just seems pretty empty to me. And so then I went traveling to go find out what seemed more viable to me.

Neal: [I came to leave my job at IBM because] Mom died ... And there's something about the, the death of your immediate parent that begins – you being able to reevaluate where you are in life, what you're doing. And I realized at that point in time that what I was doing was trying to run the rat race. That is, I wanted to have the nice job and the nice car and the big television with the Dolby 5.1 surround system. And, you know, all the things that the neighbors across the street had. And when Mom died, I looked back at what I had been chasing after and I asked myself "Is this important to me?" And ultimately the answer was no. That my life is too short for me to spend it unhappy.

This patterns arose throughout interviews; participants told me that some abrupt event in their life led them to feel that their current lives were no longer value-driven or standing on the principles they espoused.

Several other participants discussed specific life transitions that preempted their adoption of homesteading – such as bearing children or transitioning into retirement – which cultivated feelings of normlessness. As described, such transitions constitute what Swidler (1986) refers to as unsettled times – periods of change in the life course in which previous routines and norms are disrupted and one's "cultural toolkit" comes to be inappropriate to daily life. In "settled times," Swidler argues that our understanding of the world provides us with routine strategies for action that allow culture to recede into the background – we no longer think about why we do what we do, but rather our actions become habits, routines, and reactions that we can draw on without needing to consciously deliberate on each response. In contrast, in "unsettled times," periods of transition bring culture to the forefront; people must consciously negotiate meaning, seeking ideologies to understand their lives and to determine how they should act within them (Swidler 1986).

Consistent with this theory, participants described transitions in which old meanings were lost and participants felt they lacked purpose in their new life situations. For example, Christine – a mother of 3 who currently runs a 13-acre farm – tells me that she adopted homesteading in part because she had transitioned into being a stay-at-home mother and didn't find it meaningful.

And then we sat down to the finances of what two kids in daycare was gonna look like and it didn't look pretty. I realized I basically would be working, after taxes, just to pay the babysitter. So [my husband] said, "Could you maybe consider staying home?" And honestly I'd never considered it. And I thought "Alrightttt." So I liked it, but ... I was starting to get antsy. I was feeling like my brain was liquefying. That with all this education that I have I wasn't doing anything with it. And I didn't want to live like that. So then I decided to, um, I started gardening and I started making jams.

To Christine, transitioning into being a stay-at-home mother was unsatisfying and empty, ultimately precipitating a turning point in which she adopted homesteading practices. As another example, several older participants expressed a fear that life would lack meaning once they retired, telling me that they felt that traditional norms – relaxing, traveling, maximizing leisure time – were pointless and they didn't want to spend their time "going on cruises" like everybody else (John and Lynn). For example, when discussing retirement with Tom and JoAnn—who primarily engage in homesteading as a fun hobby they can do together – they tell me,

Tom: I hate to say this, but I've known a number of people who have retired and then in six months they die. Cause they either have no life, or they have nothing going on. And it's uh, that's not gonna be me...

... JoAnn: [Homesteading in retirement] gives us something to look forward to, because we have these plans. And I know some people who retire, like my mother, and her last years, I mean, she basically just gets up and just goes to bed.

While JoAnn and Tom have not yet experienced retirement, they are preparing for the transition in anticipation of a feeling of emptiness, keeping their minds "sharp" and lives meaningful by actively choosing a new cultural script – homesteading.

For some, this sense of meaninglessness was a slow build-up – a time in which they came to feel the mundanity or purposelessness of their lives climaxed in some peak or “final straw” moment when they realized they were a part of the systems they critiqued. People told me that when they most felt a part of mainstream culture – followed the “rat race,” earned a lot of money, achieved success, or followed the expectations of others in terms of a typical path or conventional norms even as simple as keeping their house clean – they felt most dissatisfied with life. As Randy tells me, becoming aware of his participation in mainstream culture when he lived in a nice neighborhood “just got really kind of existential.” Several told me that they initially followed an orthodox path toward success, seeking higher education and a high-powered career, but switched gears after they came to feel that this path lacked meaning. For example, Bob dropped out of college because he felt that conventional career paths were futile and he wanted to get paid for his “hobbies,” and Kyla decided not to pursue a photojournalism path because it felt too vested in conventional success. What participants perceived as ordinary norms felt pointless to them.

Lastly, some participants described periods in which they came to feel that their efforts to live out certain values were too costly. For these participants, they did not feel that their lives lacked meaning, but rather started to question their guiding values because they demanded too much sacrifice. For example, Keith had been working as a community organizer in a large city in the South, but it created an untenable situation for his family – “The hours were weird. We had four kids and the pay wasn’t very well ... we were really struggling I think as a family at that time. My job ended up not being what was sold to me and was very stressful and I was unhappy there, and things were hard at home.” Keith, and his wife Kristin, explained that their decision to

move on to a 20-acre property in North Carolina was to start fresh and “focus inward.” As Kristin puts it, they sought to

stop trying to like save the world ... we’re not nearly as radical in our protests and, we’re not as radical trying to stay connected to the poor. [We had been] really putting ourselves almost in a suffering position ... and it was falling apart... it was killing me.

She tells me that their decision to homestead was motivated by a desire to nurture themselves, their marriage, and their family. In short, their social justice activism required too much sacrifice, so they sought other avenues to achieve a value-driven life. Chad and Laurie’s story is reminiscent of Keith and Kristin’s – a narrative of coming to find that living out one’s ideological commitments was too costly. Chad and Laurie describe their prior life as one motivated exclusively by Christian religious commitments. As part of these commitments, they had started a neighborhood evangelism program, through which they told me they were “pouring themselves out to the community.” Ultimately, though, they started to feel that their efforts were futile. As Chad tells me “We realized we weren’t making any disciples. Like nobody was catching traction.” Laurie adds a bit later, “Nobody was making life-changing decisions, you know? ... everybody seemed content to come and listen and enjoy the food and sing and then go back and get in fights on the street and, you know, (Chad: Oh gosh, yeah) just live and do what they do.” Like Kristin and Keith, Chad and Laurie tell me that their religious pursuits were too hard on their family, and that they were now in a process of simplifying their lives and focusing less on these community-driven efforts. In both of these examples, participants had lost their sense of meaning because they could no longer sustain the efforts necessary to lead those particular types of lives. Like all those who describe a loss of meaning, they came to feel that they needed to change their lives to re-craft a value-driven life.

In short, several participants describe their stories of coming to the homesteading lifestyle as a process of losing their sense of meaning – whether through careers that felt empty, personal crises that causes one to look at life through fresh eyes, life transitions in which old meanings were lost, peak moments in which one realizes the extent to which their lives are ruled by mindless conventions, or realizing that one could not continue to lead the same type of value-driven life.

A Loss of Security

In participants' accounts of when they began homesteading activities, several also described precipitating events or periods in which they came to feel that their lives were no longer stable; they felt vulnerable or anxious about their well-being. For many, these memorable events or shocking incidents can best be described using Jasper's (1997) concept of "moral shocks" – startling events that violate one's sense of the way the world should work. Moral shocks can potentially serve as "suddenly imposed grievances" (Walsh 1981), introducing new concerns and perceived problems, but more often serve to amplify or accentuate beliefs and feelings already held (Gamson 1992). Studies of such shocks have typically examined the way they foster outrage (Nepstad and Smith 2001) – as for example when people come into contact with gruesome images portraying animal cruelty or aborted fetuses. Yet, among homesteading participants, these shocks fostered resignation or despair by leading individuals to lose faith in either the stability of current systems.

Many, for example, discussed the Great Recession as an event that led them to fear that their own economic situation had become precarious. Some were deeply and personally impacted by the recession – losing their jobs (Randy) and savings (Murray and Cassie), finding the value of their homes plummeting in the housing crisis (Blake), or finding successful

businesses suddenly unviable (Neal). Neal, for example, was in the process of franchising a successful business across the US when the recession hit; below, he describes how he felt when the recession killed his business.

Neal: And then 2008 happened. September 29, 2008. And the market collapsed. And that was the end of the services industry ... And, of course, a lot of this is also beginning to formulate in my mind that there is a distinct possibility of some form of continual economic collapse. And so, as I'm noticing this, the questions then I'm beginning to ask myself is how – what can I do to buffer my family from negligent fiscal policy by banks and government entities? And so that's really what – that was the advent of my push towards more homesteading activities here on our, our little plot of land here in [the] downtown [of a city on North Carolina] ... when I saw billions of dollars bled dry in minutes from the system ... [I wanted to] begin to wean myself somewhat from the needs of being beholden to that economic system.

The recession, for Neal, was thus a critical moment that made him feel that he was a part of an inherently unstable, precarious system. Several participants were impacted broadly by the recession, but for a small handful, like Neal, the recession radically changed their lives. For example, Blake bought a home to “flip” and was immediately under water on his mortgage, a situation that took years to climb out of financially. He now lives “off grid,” built his own home with the help of friends, and has in so doing greatly reduced his mortgage obligations. As a last example, Murray and Cassie tell me they lost around half a million dollars in the recession, abruptly ending their retirement plans of ocean sailing and traveling; instead, they traded in their lavish lifestyle to run a neighborhood community garden.

For many, the recession was an event they watched unfold on the news or vicariously experienced through watching friends and loved ones, but this made the recession no less meaningful in their stories. For example, consider how Mike discusses the way the recession led him to no longer trust the security of the retirement system – an enormously impactful moment, even if it had a less personal impact.

Mike: Angie talked about the recession of 2008. You know, that was kind of the moment when we stopped thinking that investing in stocks and bonds was really the safety net that everybody was making it out to be. And when Harrisburg went bankrupt ... That's when I accepted the possibility that my own military pension might not be bulletproof.

For these interviewees and others, the recession served to shatter their trust in the economic system. For instance, Robert – a middle-aged single man who became interested in homesteading practices after watching the TV show Doomsday Preppers – told me that the fact that his bank continued to be sold to new owners led him to think he could be unemployed at any moment. Others discussed the recession less in the context of their fear that their own savings would dwindle or jobs disappear, but more generally that they felt disillusioned that hard work would lead to success in the long run:

Nathan: I think we've both been convinced that social mobility and meritocracy are, you know, maybe idolized as being larger than they are? ... we're both also watching our siblings struggle. Watching them struggle, and you know, I think they're both somewhat symbolic of just the millennials in general. Like, there seems to be less opportunities and so much student debt and not enough opportunities to – like they were sort of promised if they get a college education everything was gonna work out if they work hard. And I feel like my brother is working his butt off and got [laughs] did well in college, well enough and seems to be struggling.

Through its impact on others they knew, a weak economy led Michelle and Nathan – a newlywed couple that recently moved to the country and are laying plans for gardens, chickens, and goats – to feel pessimistic that merit and hard work would ultimately pay off.

Another particularly striking event for many participants was Hurricane Katrina, which they offered as an incident that made them feel they could no longer rely on their government should something go awry. As Robert described it, Katrina was a "wake up call" because of what he perceived as a weak, ineffectual governmental response. The way Tammy – a single woman who uses homesteading to prepare for the second coming of Christ – explains Katrina is

emblematic of the way many referenced the event. When Tammy tells me she was "looking at what was going on" and I asked her to give me some examples, she explains,

Well I think, you know, probably one of the biggest eye openers for me was Katrina, and how people – there were no policeman around to protect those who stayed behind in in New Orleans. ...Those who were dependent on the system, you now, they had to go wherever the government said they had to go. ... It just really reinforced for me the need ... to be able to take care of ourselves.

Like Tammy, interviewees described Katrina as an event that showed them both how vulnerable humans are to unpredictable events, but also that they couldn't necessarily expect others to take care of them in those situations. This political cynicism and perceptions of vulnerability in turn cultivated a sense of fear.

While these were the strongest two patterns, other participants described various types of events that resulted in the same feeling – they felt dependent on and vulnerable to systems that no longer inspired confidence. For instance, Debbie describes the way that her son's health problems eroded her trust in the food system.

When you asked how this all got started – When [my son] ...was young he had a lot of immune issues and I had gotten a lab done of his urine. And in there he had enough arsenic to kill an adult. And they asked me, 'What in the world is he drinking?'. I said, 'Organic Pear Juice' ... And they're like 'Well there's something wrong. He's eating the playground wood outside or something.' ... So ... I sent it to the lab and the lab showed it was full of arsenic. ... [When I sent it to the company that made the pear juice] they said "What do you want?" And I said "You pay for the lab which is three hundred and something dollars and of course I will never buy any of your organic products again." And they made me sign a waiver that if he died that I wouldn't sue them... And so I bought pears from the health store, I washed them all, my mom gave me a juicer, and for four years I juiced his own juice...

And, so anyway that was, that started a lot of conversation in our house about "What are we really eating?" You know?

For Debbie, this striking event made her question the food system more generally. Others had less startling, personal experiences, but nonetheless shared stories or anecdotes with me they described as moments that shattered their faith in the ability of "the system" or that made them

feel that they needed to be able to take care of themselves. Diane – a retired teacher and truck driver that now spends her time gardening and teaching women to shoot – tells me that she had to defend her children against three home invasions in Florida; Isaac tells me he had a conversation with a friend that made him feel that larger political situations were tenuous and that the future of his family was at stake. Participants credited these time periods and events with giving them a sense of unease about their well-being, safety, or futures.

In short, several participants described losing their sense of security prior to adopting homesteading – through personal experiences or striking news events, many crediting the recession or Hurricane Katrina, that made them feel that larger systems did not reliably work in their own self-interest.

Resignation: Problems are Irreparable

I thus repeatedly encountered interviewees who expressed deep critiques of the lack of values and stability in American social systems, and prior to adopting homesteading practices came to feel that their own lives had become part of such empty cultures and precarious social systems. In many ways, it was unsurprising that participants perceived social problems and felt personally involved in or impacted by them. One of the first, most crucial insights of social movement scholars was the idea that people often participate in movements when they feel aggrieved – meaning they perceive some state of affairs as problematic or troubling. Movements, at their core, are conceptualized as a group of people that want to change their social or political environment, and believe the movement to be instrumental in doing so (Klandermans 1997). While this core insight has developed over the past decades into theories of considerably more nuance, the crux of this argument remains a crucial principle of movement studies – people often understand their participation as purposive and outcome-oriented, intended

to ameliorate some perceived social or environmental problem (Klandermans 2004). Given this foundation, I expected that I would find that participants understood their homesteading as an effort to change these systems. I expected interviewees to tell me that they were sustainably preserving the environment, or changing American culture from the ground up by re-inserting and spreading a value-driven life that honored others, or doing things for themselves would make the world a more resilient place. This is not what I found.

Participants not only believed that the world held problems, but that these problems were *irreparable*. Their outlooks were characterized by a sense of injustice, but this was coupled with a deep cynicism that institutional change was possible, and general feelings of resignation. They told me, in both direct and indirect ways, that widespread change wasn't feasible, and that they (as individuals or as part of a collective) weren't able to help bring about that change. These findings not only shattered my early expectations, but these beliefs and feelings paradoxically appear to be *demotivating*. If you have little faith in the possibility of systemic change, why do anything at all? In this section, I will use data to elaborate two unexpected patterns – 1) that participants generally felt disempowered in their own ability to influence the larger institutions to which they attributed blame, and 2) that participants held little hope of a better future. This leaves us with the question that the rest of this dissertation seeks to resolve - what motivated them to act, if not a belief that doing so would address the problems they see with the world?

Perceptions of Inefficacy

Interviewees held little hope that they had the ability to change the direction of the problems they perceived, as individuals or as part of a group. Perplexingly, when I asked interviewees directly if their homesteading efforts could help provoke the institutional changes they desired, they typically told me “no” or expressed deep ambivalence over this possibility

(even if they had explained their homesteading as an effort to effect change). Moreover, participants expressed skepticism around their own ability to influence institutions in other ways, and a particular disenchantment with influencing the government or corporations through conventional democratic involvement, such as voting, or public activism and protest. In these beliefs, participants expressed low levels of political efficacy, or faith that political action can impact the political process (Campbell et al. 1954). More specifically, they expressed low levels of external political efficacy, believing the political system to be closed to outside influence, in contrast to internal efficacy, or the extent to which someone believes they understand politics and know how to participate in it (Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Some did express a level of apparent guilt at not being involved politically, or redirected the question to explain how efforts like gardening were political, showing that they still wanted to claim that they were politically engaged; I discuss this pattern later in the dissertation. Even so, they expressed cynicism that the political system responds to the democratic process. Additionally, participants had little faith that their efforts, as part of the Modern Homesteading movement, directly addressed the problems about which they were concerned, revealing low levels of group efficacy (Bandura 1997). Again, this was the case even if participants in other parts of the interview explained their homesteading as a way to redirect institutions toward better ends. In the following, I elaborate and substantiate each of these three patterns in participants' outlooks – weak political efficacy, political cynicism, and ambivalence over whether homesteading affects change.

Weak Political Efficacy

Participants repeatedly voiced their opinion that any attempts – institutional or otherwise – to sway the decisions of politicians are ineffective. This perception arose whether participants

told me they were not involved in politics (the vast majority), had been involved in politics in the past (a minority), or were still involved in politics or activism (a handful). As Peter – a semi-retired academic who is currently involved in the forming of a local eco-village – succinctly explains, “Activism, I don’t think it’s gonna change anything.” Over and over again, participants told me that they were not engaged in public protest or democratic participation, because they simply did not think that it impacted any outcomes.

When I asked interviewees if they had ever been involved in activism, I often was told that they were not engaged in such pursuits because they considered them ineffective. For example, when I ask Michelle and Nathan if they had been involved in “political activism groups,” my question is interrupted with a resounding “nope” from Michelle. Expanding, they tell me,

Nathan: I just feel like it's a waste of time.

Michelle: Yeah I feel jaded. I feel like -

Nathan: I mean it just makes me feel like "Oh yeah" And then what did we, we didn't accomplish anything.

Later, Michelle and Nathan tell me that advocacy is bound to fall on deaf ears.

Michelle: Yeah there was nothing accomplished, nobody cares. Like everybody, I think it's gotten to the point where everybody has a cause right? And nobody really cares what other people's causes are at this point.

...Nathan: I think it's just like (Michelle: Yeah I don't know.), just watching these issues you care about just being ignored for so long is just...

Echoes of this sentiment were expressed again and again in my interviews – activism is a “waste of time,” “ignored” by those in power, and on the whole ineffective. As another interviewee, Tammy, explains, “I don’t see any real effectiveness out of any of the movements that I’ve, that I’ve seen... politics and politicians are just – it’s a game of power and I’m not interested in games of power.”

Additionally, those interviewees who had been involved in public activism and protest in the past told me that they felt their efforts had made little difference in the world. As I discuss in the introduction to this chapter, Heidi tells me that she feels that her protesting earlier in life “didn’t seem like it did that much” and she “didn’t see change affected by [her] action.” Similarly, Kylah – who gardens extensively in town and makes documentaries about farming the food system – explains protesting as falling on deaf ears:

My protesting phase ... it just never felt effective. You know, it's like you are in a van with all these college kids and you're like riled up, you know, and you're gonna go like shout on capitol hill and you show up and you're yelling and it's exciting and everyone's charged. And I every time ... I would always have this moment of thinking "I'm just yelling." You know? I'm just yelling. And at who? Who's listening? And it just felt like it was more of a way for young people to like get their anger out and express their frustration with things than actually affect change. ... I mean I think that protesting has its place and I think that kind of community action can be really important for certain things. I just found for myself it wasn't the right kind of mobilization.

Those interviewees who had been involved in activism in the past typically expressed such disenchantment, with some even telling me that activism was at one point in history effective but was not in today’s world. For example, Peter, who tells me that he was politically engaged during the anti-communist period, anti-war movement around Vietnam, and with the Sanctuary movement, tells me that activism as a strategy simply no longer works. He says,

But it hasn't reached a point — I mean it's disappointing. I go to Moral Monday [protests led by religious progressives against several decisions of a conservative state legislature] and you know I see, maybe a couple hundred people and they're all feeling good. But it's having no effect. So I just don't believe that activism alone is gonna do anything. It can, and it did in the, uh, in the anti-war movement of the 60s and 70s.

Peter then explained to me that activism used to help because it was so intense, citing several examples of bombings for me to illustrate how far people were willing to go. In doing so, he insinuates that people today are too apathetic to go the lengths needed to influence change.

The handful of people who told me that they had recently been involved in activism still tended to tell me such activism is ineffective. Rather, they explained their presence as ideological expression, telling me they think it's important to "take a stand" and "put convictions into the public sphere." For example, after Peter tells me he no longer finds activism impactful, he mentions that he continues to attend protests; still, he remains consistent in his account that activism is futile:

I mean, how long have the Moral Monday demonstrations been going on in Raleigh? At least a couple of years. And absolutely nothing has changed. People feel good, they're there, they've got their sign and hugging everybody. But it's not changing anything I don't think. It's taking a stand and I love that, I've been down there, I'll take part in it. Um, it's important. But is it having much of an effect? I think if you were to analyze that question, well, you'd discover it's not.

Similarly, Lem – the executive director of a community garden whose mission is to help people connect with "neighborhoods, land, and God" – has also recently been in Moral Monday rallies, but again tells me in no uncertain terms that he doesn't think it makes a difference:

And so I decided that if I was gonna be involved like for personal reasons mostly I wanted to sort of put my convictions out into the public sphere. ... And so I did it for personal reasons. It was like a part of my spiritual journey. There was a part of it, of trying to demonstrate like some sign of solidarity with some of the people that I interact with through the organization that I'm the director of. ... So I would say I did it more to sort of stir up my own soul and also to facilitate some conversations with like closer friends and family about why I did what I did. But I don't really think it would change anyone's mind in the General Assembly.

In Lem's perception, his activism is not effective in terms of outcomes, but is a way to show others what he believes in. Here, he also emphasizes that he did it largely for himself rather than public goals.

Political Cynicism

Underlying the perception that activism and political engagement are fruitless was the opinion that any method that targets the political system is bound to fail because this system is a

closed loop, unamenable to influence or change. As Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) point out, “For the perception of the possibility of change to take hold people need to perceive the group to be able to unite and fight for the issue *and they must perceive the political context as receptive to the claims made by their group*” (889). However, most participants expressed high levels of political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), or lack of trust in the responsiveness of government to their interests and desires. Overwhelmingly, participants told me that they were apolitical, although many admitted to keeping up with politics and having strong political opinions. While many participants were thus politically engaged in the sense that, as Emily tells me, they tried to “stay on top of things” and be “as aware as possible” of political issues, they were rarely if ever politically active.

Moreover, the vast majority of participants felt unrepresented by the political structure. For example, almost every single participant that I spoke with described their political identification as Independent or Libertarian; very few participants felt that their beliefs were represented by the current party system. Consider, for example, how Dean and Lindsey – who run a small family homestead on which they homeschool their three children – respond when I ask them how they identify politically.

Lindsey: Independent - Which I think most homesteaders would agree with.
Unless they're Preppers in which they're Tea Party.

Dean: Yeah, I identify as it's not working and we need to start over.

Lindsey: Yeah, exactly, that's what Independent is.

Dean: I don't really identify with the political structure. It, it's broken.

Lindsey: It's not br-- it was created to be broken.

In this exchange, emblematic of the perspectives of many participants, the political system is “broken” – something with which they feel completely disconnected, that doesn't represent their

interests or concerns. Because so many participants felt unrepresented politically, no participants to my knowledge were involved in conventional politics.

Many participants were deeply distrustful of those in power, holding little faith that politicians would make decisions in the best interest of the public. Consequently, they were cynical that the powerful players that they saw at fault for social issues would ever influence things for the better. For example, Todd describes to me his cynicism about politics generally:

Jordan: What direction would you like the government head in?

Todd: [Quietly chuckles] Um [pause] that's hard because it's really hard to imagine the government heading in any direction that's helpful. ... Um, it would be beautiful and great if we could just like get it together and, and become progressive, you know, the way the progressives want. Um, which would be doing the right thing and, you know, treating poverty and inequality and the environment and getting that all together. And, and having a non-corrupt government that just got it together and, and it works. That would be wonderful. But I don't hold out for that.

People did not believe that politicians would represent, or respond to, their beliefs or interests because they felt politicians were self-serving and in many cases corrupt. As David tells me, politicians

don't speak for you and they don't speak for me, they speak for their own special interests ... You know, both liberal and conservative-minded politicians have, have failed us to the point where you can't trust them, you can't rely on 'em.

As this quote demonstrates, David feels that politicians not only don't represent his ideas, but don't speak for any of *us*, defined broadly. Interviewees told me time and again that politicians are “in it” for the wrong reasons – their own. For example, Dan – who runs a climate research institute and founded a local Gardeners and Homesteaders Meet-Up⁴ group – tells me that politics is not “about the issues:”

Dan: [Politics is a] game... It's a lot of power plays. ... You know, it's really not what's right or wrong, but it's how can I become more important? How can I

⁴ An online program devoted to bringing people together around hobbies.

become more powerful? What kind of influence can I have? And it's not about the issues. Um, it's about power and money. And that's, that's frustrating to me.

John and Lynn – a retired couple that run a “small family farm” on 28 acres – expand on this theme, telling me how politics is more about money and influence for the individual politicians than it is about anything impacting the public good:

Lynn: [Politics is] all a quest for power and money. I don't think there's any service involved. I think they lie between their teeth and they'll just say anything – they're interested in getting re-elected and not in, not in service. There's not statesmen left anymore.

... John: And who wouldn't want to be [a politician]? When you look at the six-figure salary that you're guaranteed for life after four years of being in that office, of health care that's the best there is available that's guaranteed for you for the rest of your life. I mean the list just goes on and on... That's a lot of tax money... It's self-interest. And one of the biggest things that drives all of us – some control it better than others – is a quest for power. People like power. And government has gotten to the point where the government has all the power and the citizens have all the responsibility.

Here, John expresses a deeply cynical view of the lack of reciprocity between government and citizens. Overwhelmingly, interviewees felt similarly concerned that people in power are driven by self-interest rather than the welfare of their constituents they purportedly represent. As Isaac tells me, “[I] feel like, you know, our government does not mean our, our citizens well. Or they're not worried about our welfare as much as they want to keep the structure in place.” In short, participants felt that the social contract had deteriorated, painting a picture of a government distant from and unresponsive to the needs of its people.

Homesteading as a Strategy: Not a Solution

Initially, I sought to make sense of this pattern of political cynicism and perceptions of the futility of activism by hypothesizing that participants believed that lifestyle movements were a more effective strategy – that perhaps by changing their daily lives and in so doing encouraging others to do the same, they thought that they could effect change while bypassing a dysfunctional

and unresponsive political system. This was, unexpectedly, not the case. Participants in general did *not* consistently or clearly see homesteading as an instrument to affect change on the problems they had discussed. And, those who did at some point explain homesteading as a means to affect change contradicted this assertion in other parts of the interview.

I found that many interviewees were pessimistic, ambivalent, or agnostic about whether or not homesteading would impact institutions or generally make a difference. Like negative attitudes more generally, this skepticism was strongest when I was not calling on participants to account for their homesteading by asking them directly if homesteading could impact change. For example, when the prompting question had nothing to do with the impact of homesteading, and participants ended up discussing the potential influence of homesteading through their stream of consciousness, they were often deeply cynical. Yet, when asked directly if homesteading would impact change, some participants would provide more hopeful responses. In particular, many had explanations for how homesteading *could* affect change, but then would tell me in direct or subtle ways in other parts of the interview that they didn't believe homesteading *does* or *will* affect change. In short, despite some instances of more positive accounts, participants' outlooks revealed deep skepticism that homesteading provided a solution for the institutions they felt to be in crisis.

First, participants rarely believed that their individual efforts were making much of a difference. While I did occasionally run across a "drop in the bucket" logic – the idea that every little bit counts – this reasoning was in the minority. Much more often, I encountered the idea that participants didn't think of their homesteading efforts as a contribution to change, and doubted whether their participation mattered much one way or the other.

Todd: I think my contribution's probably pretty limited. I think this community has a lot of potential to do that more than like an individual. But we're not doing it right now. And it's sort of disappointing.

Heidi: I don't think that someone living by themselves homesteading is really doing anything.

While a widely-held notion within the study of movements is the idea that people participate in collective action when they feel their individual actions “matter” in contributing toward some larger goal, this did not appear to be the case within the homesteading movement.

Many participants believed that there would never be enough people homesteading to make a substantial difference; they doubted that the movement would grow large enough to fundamentally matter. Todd explained this to me as a simple matter of scale:

I mean [homesteading], it's, I think it's intended to solve problems ... [but] I don't think it's had a – I mean the scale of our society and, I mean, the amount of people homesteading and, and the amount of people in our society that are living normal lives – it's so different. ...It would be really hard to scale it up ...

Similarly, Xander – a former computer programmer who quit his job to prepare for possible disasters and do self-reliance consulting – tells me that the ability to affect change rests on large numbers of people participating, which he thinks will never happen. When asked if homesteading can impact some of the problems he discusses, he first answered, “Um, if it got to a critical mass, yeah” but then elaborates that he doesn't think we realistically would ever get to this “critical mass.” Some explained to me that the trend would never reach this point because there were not enough others interested, telling me others are too apathetic, short-sighted, materialistic, or unwilling to take on the costs of the lifestyle. Some explained that the world was now too overpopulated to provide enough land for everyone to grow their own food without relying on centralized, industrial farming. Others told me that homesteading practices required privilege – money for land, leisure time for the practices – and thus was an option functionally

closed to all but the middle class. Participants were thus skeptical in their expectations of others, feeling that others were unwilling or unable to adopt the lifestyle.

Part of this pessimism around the ability of homesteading to influence change was due to a sense that the current interest in homesteading was a temporary fad. People describe homesteading as a movement that ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes; Neal refers to the “homesteading pendulum,” Tom tells me “what is old is new again,” JoAnn tells me it’s a “fad,” Dan says we’re having a current “revival,” and Todd tells me “it comes and goes.” Many participants connected the Modern Homesteading movement to previous iterations - the Back to the Land movement of the 1960s and 1970s, interest in self-sufficiency during the Cold war, the Victory Gardens of World War II, and more – implying that this repetition of the movement is fated to die off as it has throughout history. Participants tended to explain peaks of homesteading practices as reactions to shocks or catastrophes, believing that once those crises fade from the public imagination people will see homesteading as something that requires too much effort and people will return to more convenient lives. As Neal explains, the “pendulum” will “swing the other way again.” This sense that the renewed interest in homesteading will ultimately subside impedes perceptions of efficacy.

In addition to these general perceptions of the inherent limits of the growth of homesteading, some participants specifically told me that homesteading did not directly address or solve large-scale problems. When asked directly, some were strikingly direct:

Tammy: Hm, that's a tough question. I don't, I don't see that it changing world events one way or the other. [For] better or worse.

Nathan: I think it's more reflective of, more reflective than impactive [sic]. Like it reflects I think a rejection of some of the commercial stuff. But I don't think it has a huge impact.

Dean: No, no. I don't think enough people care or will ever care.

Neal: Is it a solution? No. It's, it's a reaction. It's a reaction.

Others were more ambivalent or agnostic. For example, Thomas – a former structural engineer who quit his job to help start a small organic farm – tells me, “Um, but I also don't know ... I don't necessarily have any faith that it's going ... that it's gonna just keep growing and it's going to be successful at all.” I got several responses such as “I don't know,” “Maybe,” or that they weren't sure. While perceptions of the inefficacy of homesteading in many cases were complex and contradictory (a pattern I analyze in further chapters), for some the issue was rather simple. They believed that homesteading either didn't impact these problems, told me how it could but didn't feel that did, weren't sure as to whether it impacted institutions, or it was clear in the interview that they had never before thought about this issue - suggesting at a minimum that perceptions of efficacy were not a central component of their accounts.

Visions of the Future: Pessimistic Predictions

Not only did participants believe that they did not hold the power to influence change – through activism, politics, or homesteading – but many were skeptical that *anyone* or *anything* could effectively address the issues about which they were concerned. Participants not only believed the world was riddled with problems, but that these problems were past the point of no return; the future looked bleaker than the present. Many participants expressed their cynicism that institutional, societal-level change was even possible. Emotionally, participants were most likely to express hopelessness, resignation, or despair than other more positive or active emotions when discussing how they felt about the future. This lack of faith in positive change was embodied in predictions about the future which were moderately to intensely pessimistic, to the point that some believed that systems were so problematic they would inevitably fail and cause a disaster or catastrophe. Here I will explore general trends in how interviewees predicted that the future would be worse than the present, and detail more specifically how this pessimism

about the future crystallizes in the “Prepper” sub-category of the movement whose participants hold a strong anxiety and sense of doom over apocalyptic futures.

Overall, participants felt that the world in general was headed in the wrong direction and was in many respects beyond repair. For some, a diffuse sense of pessimism pervaded their outlooks, rarely articulated directly but rather in nebulous terms such as “the way things are happening in the world.” In some cases, people had trouble identifying specific issues, but described the world generally as going downhill or headed in the wrong direction. For example, in an interview with Robert, when I ask him when he first started calling what he was doing “prepping” – a term that generally means preparing for possible disasters - he tells me,

Robert: ... it's more of a, you know, looking at the way things are happening in the world, and, you know, how people react...

Jordan: When you say "the way things are happening in this world" what exactly do you mean by that?

Robert: Uh, a little bit of everything. Politics, wars, uh, you know, you see how easy, you know wars get started. You know with Russia and, uh, China and Korea, uh, you know, just a lot of them, you know, infrastructure things like the electrical grids and stuff like that. You know, knowing, you know, kind of how those things can just fall – an earthquake could happen. I mean just recently on the news they, you know, had about the, uh, solar flares which, you know, four or five years ago knocked out Canada. Uh, you know, they're talking like those transformers that we have here in the United States, if one of those get knocked out it takes a year to build those. And we don't have like a bunch of those in stock. Could you imagine, a solar flare would knock twenty of those out in the area. And the dry ai – luckily in the country it's not as bad, but in major cities you'd probably have riots and stuff, so.

In this brief response, Robert brings up: politics, possible wars with Russia, China or Korea, infrastructure problems, earthquakes, solar flares, and riots. This sort of description, characteristic of other interviews, reveals a more general pessimistic attitude about the state of the world than any specific concerns.

Not only did participants feel that the world was full of problems, but also that the problematic systems humans had created had spiraled out of control, such that there was no going back. For example, Rick tells me,

Rick: That's the problem is that – and so ultimately homesteading and sustainability is not where actually it's at. That's not actually where... the pooch is fucked. It's game set match. Ok, the earth is gonna, there's gonna be a serious reckoning. And there's gonna be a tremendous decrease in the number of people on the planet. I don't think we're gonna be extinguished, but we're gonna see a huge number of people die off alright? And it's gonna happen within the next 100 years and I'm sure, alright? ...

Jordan: Is it still important to, to address it? You've said a couple of things kind of like "ultimately it doesn't matter." (Yeah.) So do you still feel a desire to kind of change the direction of the planet? No.

Rick: Nope.

Not only does Rick believe that the environmental problems he perceives are past the point of fixing, he believes that the extent of damage is so severe that it's not even worth the fight. He has, like many others I spoke with, given up. Others express this same resignation, telling me it is essentially pointless to think about solutions. Murray – a retiree who took up homesteading practices after losing half a million in the real estate bust and is deeply concerned about the economy and political system – tells me,

Jordan: So I guess my question again would be like what is the – (Murray: What's the answer?) What is the solution? Yeah. What is, what will make things better?

Murray: Oh, that's like saying - you drive over the cliff and you're going down: "Whoa, what can we do to fix this?" (Jordan: So there's no stopping it?) Stay away from the cliff.

Similarly, others use imagery to show me they believe problems are too far gone to effect change. Isaac, concerned about consolidation of power and the loss of individual freedom, tells me "it's the Titanic and we're sitting on top of a glacier already," whereas Todd, concerned about environmental sustainability, tells me that the "the Genie's out of the bottle." These sorts

of responses invoke a sense of resignation to the end – that the path we have already forged determines our future in a fatalistic way.

Several painted an image of an extremely bleak and hopeless future in the context of the specific problems about which they were concerned. For example, John, tells me that we “aren’t far from a catastrophe in food.” When Dan tells me that there will be a “crash,” and I ask him to tell me more about that, he says,

The rate that we're using our fossil fuels and our non-sustainable resources is not sustainable. The level that we're putting CO₂ into the environment, and causing global warming, is not sustainable. Both or either of those will eventually cause a crash, will cause major social disruption. You know, as a climate scientist for the last 22 years, I know that there's a point in which we put so much carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas in the atmosphere that that amount of warming then becomes a driver itself. So even if people stop putting in CO₂, the planet is going to continue to warm. And there's a lot that goes into it, but when that point happens then there's nothing we can do to stop it. And it will continue for centuries to come. And, everything we know, life as we know it across the planet will change. It just will. When that happens, everything we know in the world will change. There will be civil unrest, there will be wars, there will be food fights. There will be all kinds of very bad things that happen when you don't have enough to eat...

In this alarmist way of discussing climate change, there is nothing we can do to stop a major environmental, then social, catastrophe. Various others discussed environmental futures equally as dire, centered on uncontrolled growth, overdependence on fossil fuels, problems caused by our food system, etc. When Blake, for example, discusses the system “failing” and I ask if he thinks things “could or would fail,” he just laughs and says “Well it’s bound to ...” It’s important to note that the perception that our future will be worse than our present was widely held if not universal, incarnating a deeply felt pessimism about the direction of the world and the ability of humans to control that direction.

Connecting to earlier analyses of political cynicism, several participants told me that the political system would never improve. Tammy is most articulate in this fatalistic perspective:

Oh it's gonna get worse, it's gonna get worse. ... to me if they're a politician and their mouth is moving, they're lying. I don't care what party they're with. And if – no party is going to sneak into Washington and change everything back to where everything functions the way it should. I wish we had a reset button but we don't. We're stuck with what we've got. And all I have seen from when I was a little girl to now - and I look back at history, its, things are not getting better, they're getting worse. And it's going to continue just to get, to get worse.

Xander echoes this statement, explaining to me the impossibility that politicians could ever change the system.

It's beyond the ability of, of a person to change. I mean, it's a system, you know – and this system's been in place for – you know, this is not "Oh well, corruption and the government's gone to hell in a hand basket because Obama's in Office." No, this has been going on for years, for decades. [Laughs.]

Here, Xander explains that political problems are too deeply rooted and long-term to be changed.

Thus, not only did they feel they could not influence politics, but that generally the system was beyond hope.

For some, this feeling that problems will continue to worsen evokes a strong fear or an underlying sense of anxiety. For example, when I ask Tammy if she thinks that homesteading is growing, she tells me that she understands it to be growing because of an increasing “unease” about the direction of the world:

I think more and more people are getting concerned about what's going on the world. Um, they have different fears. You know, some people the government, some people fear terrorists, some people fear space aliens, who knows. Um, but it's there's, there's definitely a growing sense of unease and feeling that things can, things as we know it can fall apart in a second and they want to be prepared.

To Tammy, the extent and diversity of social problems about which she's aware makes her feel like this could suddenly and abruptly change for the worse. Using the phrase a handful of my participants did, the “shit could hit the fan.”

Preppers

In interviews with those who identify as “Preppers,” who focus on preparing for some potential form of disaster or disruption to daily life, these pessimistic predictions find their clearest and most articulate form. These interviewees went beyond briefly mentioning the possibility of a negative future; they focused much of their interview on the probability of total, utter system failure. Some of them had such confidence in this probability that they felt this future was inevitable. These participants believed more strongly in the future of system failure than the possibility of positive institutional change, feeling certain that the future will be worse than the present. While only a small handful identified as Preppers, the vast majority of interviewees invoked this sort of “disaster talk” language at some point in the interview.

The participants I encountered who identified as Preppers and/or invoked the Prepper vocabulary presented to me a range of different futures – from political unrest leading to civil war, to an infectious disease outbreak, to natural disasters, to the collapse of the electrical grid – but were united in their conviction that our future was bleak, certain to be worse than our current reality. For example, David believes that economic collapse is imminent within the next few decades, due to hyperinflation of the dollar as a result of the retraction of investor demand on American currency due to the decline of the US as a major world superpower. When this occurs, David believes that the US will resort to a “Wild West” type society that is “run by the gun,” in which people with skills of self-sufficiency will be hunted down by those who were not prepared for economic collapse. He describes an extremely violent future to me, using the phrase “when there’s blood in the streets” several times throughout the interview and expressing to me his concern that he will be a probable victim of violence because he contains valuable and rare

survival skills. As another example of a very different, but similarly anxiety-producing, future is Tammy - who believes that the second coming of Christ will be soon. She tells me,

I feel like He's telling us we need to be ready. That things are going to get, things are going to get difficult. I'm, I'm a strong Christian and I believe with all of my heart that God is coming, Jesus is coming back soon. And what we're going, what we're seeing now and what we're going to see even more of before He comes back is the birth pains. The struggle. There's going to be difficulty, there's going to be hard times. There's going to be, there's going to be natural events and there's going to governmental events that are going to challenge us even before He returns. ...

While Tammy paints a very different picture of what will cause hard times than does David, her emotional response is similar – fear around the direction of the future.

While on the whole people who *identified* as “Preppers” were more conservative politically and tended to express concerns that were consistent with a conservative political platform, not all those who discussed the possibility of total collapse and destruction were conservative. The Prepper *vocabulary* was used on both sides of the political spectrum, although liberal-leaning folks were less likely to call themselves “Preppers.” Several liberal-leaning interviewees expressed the concern that some form of environmental disaster would lead to a type of collapse, experiencing the same feelings of anxiety and fear around this future. While the content of the “scenario” may differ, testament to the cultures in which participants are embedded and the types of social problems that have become associated with specific political platforms, the way that participants discussed these futures is strikingly similar. For example, Todd tells me that when he originally moved onto the intentional community he got really into the “collapse culture” and became a “doomer.”

... one of the people here at [the intentional community in which I live] was really into the peak oil thing, and like collapse. And, we've got to get off the grid and we've got to grow all our own food. “Cause society's going to collapse any moment!” Right? [Chuckles] And I was like fully like in there. I was like “Yes!” It's right! Everything's, the oil's like, you know, everything's gonna go down! You know? The economy, the environment, the petroleum – it's all, you

know.” And, so it was like a mad dash to like “let’s get the house done before everything collapses and get the garden in and --” [Sighs] And then I got tired of waiting [laughs] for everything to collapse.

While Todd describes this culture in the past tense, he does so in a way that echoes the sentiments of the Preppers. Similarly, Heidi similarly tells me that when she was younger she focused heavily on her sense that “everything was gonna go to shit” because,

uncontrolled growth is totally unsustainable and we are using up all of our natural resources and polluting the, the biosphere so intensely life as we know it is gonna change, drastically. And it’s inevitable that this civilization is gonna collapse just like all major civilizations have in humanities past. And probably crash harder than most have in the past because it’s ... just so much bigger and destructive ... and just global.

Heidi’s sense that some form of collapse is simply inevitable because of the “unsustainable” nature of our resource use – whether in her lifetime or not – parallels the discussions of Preppers, again regardless of whether she claims that collective identity.

Demonstrating the primarily emotional nature of these future predictions is the pattern that most participants were less committed to, or convinced by, the probability of one specific problem than they were to their *emotional* sense of impending doom. My early exposure to the Prepping movement came from the sensationalized documentary-style TV show “Doomsday Preppers,” which begins each show with an introduction of the family interviewed by explaining that the family is “prepping for X” (the explosion of a local volcano, economic collapse, global warming-induced droughts, etc.). Given this background, I had anticipated that those who discussed their homesteading in the context of “preparation” would tell me the one disaster for which they were preparing. I quickly found this not to be the case, with participants repeatedly telling me either vague pessimistic futures or articulating several possible futures rather than committing to one possibility. In the first interview in which this “scenario talk” arose, I was so confused I asked directly:

Jordan: When you think about prepping, though – I know that you've talked about several different kinds of disaster scenarios. When you think about the future do you see one of them as being more likely? Do you consider yourself as prepping for something in particular?

Robert: Uh, not, well, I mean, you have all kinds of things that can happen.

In short, "no." Their vision of looming disaster was nonspecific, but rather a diffuse sense that there were too many problems in the world to avoid something scary happening.

Pessimism, Inefficacy, and Ideological Structuring

As I introduce at the beginning of this chapter, these patterns – feeling personally enmeshed in the systems about which one is concerned, and generally disheartened at the prospect of positive change – were clearest in those interviews in which participants accounted for their lifestyle ideologically. My analysis thus far has focused on those interviews. Here, I offer an analysis of the exceptions – the more hopeful, efficacious interviews which either rarely mentioned problems with the world, or if they did, felt they could be addressed. To be clear, such interviews were few and far in between; the vast majority of my interviewees expressed to some extent the feelings and perceptions elaborated earlier in this chapter. While rare, the cases in which these outlooks were absent best support the argument that pessimistic outlooks were associated with ideological accounts.

In the instances in which people were optimistic about the potential impact of the homesteading movement, the prospect of institutional change, or the future more generally, the interviewees were much more likely to account for their homesteading using non-ideological reasons or non-contentious ideologies. For example, when I ask Rebecca if people participating in homesteading practices is “helping anything,” she responds,

Yeah I feel that way. I feel like when people participate and then – it kind of reminds me of dominos when one falls over then it starts to make a dominos effect... it's almost like word of mouth and building those relationships and

spreading that knowledge. It's all about homesteading and farming. (Jordan: And do you think it's helping the environment?) Yeah I would believe so.

Rebecca primarily accounts for her homesteading as an altruistic endeavor motivated by her religious beliefs – for example, she and her parents learn homesteading skills so that they can teach them to people in Africa to “help” them – as well as healthy eating. While Rebecca mentions environmental beliefs as motivating her, she does not devote much time to elaborating this belief system; it is not central in the interview. In short, she does not primarily account for her homesteading as an effort to address problems, and to the extent that she does connect it to environmental problems she sees homesteading practices as helping to address them.

Similarly, Mary – a young woman who spends much of her time in her kitchen fermenting and making her own things – expresses both her viewpoint that homesteading is affecting change, as well as a generally more positive vision of the direction of the world. For example, when I ask Mary what she loves about North Carolina (which she had repeatedly mentioned), she says that she loves “the community that is building around local foods... And how, I think it's going in the right direction.” When I follow up on this she says,

I think we're slowly, at a grassroots level, kind of coming to realize that those things are not sustainable. They're not good for the environment. They're not good for farmers. ... And, so just smaller. More sustainable. More environmentally conscious, and community conscious farming operations. And I think that's where we're heading.

Later, when I ask her if she thinks homesteading addresses any social or environmental problems she says, “Yeah I think homesteading can address all of the above - environment, economy, and society.” In addition to this efficacious response, Mary does not have a particularly pessimistic worldview or negative emotional experiences prior to homesteading. Mary tells me that she homesteads because it's fun, good for her health, and it's cheaper; she draws on fragments of ideologies, telling me that she wants to be self-sufficient, to contribute to alternative food

systems, and wants to know where her food comes from. Yet, she does not emphasize or elaborate these perspectives, and is somewhat inarticulate in these motivations – getting confused, hesitating, asking me to repeat questions – when I press her to unpack these perspectives.

As a final example, Anna – a manager at a local Farmer's Market who lives with her partner in a renovated farm house and gardens extensively – is noticeably more optimistic around the possibility of institutional change, and in particular change brought about through legislative or governmental initiatives, than other interviewees. After she discusses some issues she sees with the industrialized food system, I ask her if anything can change those issues.

I think some of the money that has been made available through the Affordable Care Act that's going towards healthy eating nutrition, I think that is awesome. Um, and starts to make real like that connection between being healthy and what you eat. I think if we stopped subsidizing large scale agriculture that would help. I think if we all stopped – started eating less meat that would help big time. There's some organizations that are doing these things called "veggie prescriptions." Um, I don't know that much about them but I really like the idea. [Laughs] ... Like people realizing that like food is health, food is medicine.

Later, we discuss her engagement in some public protest activity, including her participation in the Black Lives Matter movement. When ask her if this movement is impacting anything, she responds,

I think it is impacting a lot of things. I think that I, yesterday, read a, like the cover of the New York Times magazine was about young activists in that movement. So I think that spreading social awareness and some of the policy changes that we've seen result, I think it's been very effective so far.

In this, we see a notably more optimistic view of activism and political responses to protest than other interviewees. Like Rebecca and Mary, Anna did not express strong ideological motivations for engaging in homesteading. Anna primarily accounts for her homesteading as a way to participate in and contribute to her "community," briefly discusses self-sufficiency, tells me that

it's "meditative" and brings her "joy," and that she likes making things herself because its "satisfying."

As a last example, in a few cases interviewees simply never really discussed their sense of efficacy, visions of the future, or grievances – because this was simply not the way they thought of their homesteading practices, and so the subjects came up briefly, if at all. For example, JoAnn and Tom primarily identify homesteading as a fun hobby – something they can do together and enjoy, as well as an activity that increases their community involvement, exercise, and outdoor exposure. Because they do not frame their homesteading in the context of larger social or environmental issues, questions around efficacy and hope simply never arise in the interview. Similarly, Evan – a PhD student in English who spends much of his time hunting – sees his practices as primarily a hobby, something he enjoys for its own sake as it gets him outdoors and he can hunt with his beloved dog. In the interview, he discusses the nuts and bolts of hunting practices at length, but talks little about the ideas behind them. Though he is ideological in that he is interested in the “spiritual” side of hunting, including romantic notions of the earth giving “gifts” to him through presenting him animals, this ideology is not an expression of dissent or protest to the status quo. Questions of efficacy, the future, or grievances did not arise during the interview.

In short, the range of contentious ideological accounts and pessimistic outlooks varied together on the same continuum. Those who felt most hopeful, or at the least unconcerned, with the direction of the future and the possibility of institutional change were also those who did not explain their homesteading as an effort to express contention. In contrast, the stronger the sense of contention, the stronger the undercurrent of pessimism and resignation within interviews – not only with the current state of the world, but also the general ability for future positive

institutional change. Both of these characteristics, pessimistic outlooks and ideological accounts, exist on a continuum or spectrum; while difficult to illustrate the full range of degrees of pessimism and inefficacy within interviews, I have sought to illuminate the poles within this chapter.

The Puzzle: Putting these Findings in Context

In sum, I found that those participants with the strongest ideological accounts of homesteading felt that individuals were losing control over their own lives to valueless or unstable cultural and social systems; that they became personally involved in or impacted by these systems; and felt that neither politics, activism, or even their homesteading practices, could stop things from getting worse. These findings raise the question – why act, if doing so is not understood as an effort to change the problematic systems in which one is enmeshed? Why act, if one feels resigned and pessimistic about the future? The literature on movements, to this point, cannot satisfactorily answer these questions. While elements of the story up to this point may be deeply familiar to scholars of movements, other patterns – such as the despairing, passive emotional tenor of interviews and lack of efficacy – are new, or at least crystallized, in the particularly individualized and private form of activism found within lifestyle movements. These patterns present the paradox that the rest of this dissertation seeks to solve. Such perceptions and emotions would typically lead to apathy and inaction – and yet Homesteaders are not apathetic, and they “act” by engaging in certain practices and asserting that these practices are meaningful.

Much of this story is recognizable, echoing core elements of common stories of movement participation. In most movements, activists perceive problems with the world and at some point come to feel impacted by these problems (Klandermans 1997). This is a necessary,

albeit insufficient, condition for movements (Klandermans and Oegema 1987); the vast majority of movements hold at their center a desire to change something about a larger social or political environment, a perception described by movement scholars as grievances. This study in many ways would come as no surprise to scholars of movements, who have previously found that, much like participants of the homesteading movement, people join movements when they feel unrepresented by and ignored by the decisions of larger systems (Walker and Smith 2002; Tyler and Smith 1998); or when they feel that others – like the politically powerful – receive undue advantage relative to their own experience (Stouffer et al. 1949).

Yet, the story of homesteading deviates after this basic resemblance with other movements. While the grievances expressed by participants do not radically differ from grievances in other movements, the emotional responses to them do. And, emotions matter. Grievances, as I mention above, as insufficient conditions to join movements – they are ubiquitous features of social life, and in and of themselves are not enough to explain why people would participate in a movement (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Taking this into consideration, the question that scholars have turned to is why aggrieved people participate in movements. Recently, scholars have argued that a cognitive perception of a grievance translates into movement behavior only when it provokes certain feelings that serve as a bridge to action. Empirical work has shown that *feelings* of injustice, or affective injustice, are more predictive of movement participation than cognitive interpretations of injustice (see van Zomeren et al. 2008 for a meta-analysis of these findings). Participation comes not as a direct result of one's grievances, but as a consequence of the emotional response to such a perception. More specifically, the emotion most tightly coupled with movement participation is *anger*, which has been shown again and again to play a motivating role in collective action (e.g. van Stekelenburg

and Klandermans 2013; van Zomeren et al. 2004; Leach et al. 2007). Additionally, such anger most often leads to movement participation when this emotion is held on behalf of a larger collective; people are more likely to participate in a movement if they hold group-based anger than anger on their own behalf (van Zomeren et al. 2004).

Yet, the interviews in this study were not infused with active emotions like frustration or outrage, but rather the stories of their lives prior to homesteading as well as their general outlooks are characterized by a family of more passive emotions that are typically understood to paralyze or inhibit action – pessimism, resignation, cynicism, fear, and unhappiness. Such a finding clearly diverges from the current literature on emotions and collective action, which theorizes (e.g. Jasper 1998) and demonstrates (e.g. Gould 2009; Klandermans et al. 2008; Mackie et al. 2000) the inhibitive effect of such emotions. Similarly, Jasper’s (1997) moral shocks, which play a key role in participants’ accounts of how they came to start homesteading, are typically understood to have the potential to lead to political action, and in fact are often used intentionally to do so by social movement organizations when the shock “raises a sense of *outrage* in a person” (Jasper 1997: 106; Jasper 1995; Nepstad & Smith 2001). Yet, in this study, such moral shocks more often produced fear, anxiety, or resignation – emotions of acceptance, not defiance.

The extent to which participants believed that the world not only holds problems, but that they are *irreparable* – that widespread change wasn’t really possible and that they as individuals or a collective weren’t able to bring about that change – is also strikingly different than typical findings in movement studies. One of the most widespread assumptions in movements is the relationship between efficacy and activism – that people are more likely to participate in collective action when they believe that a state of affairs can be changed, and that the movement

can be an instrument of that change (Corrigan-Brown 2012). In particular, people are most likely to join movements when they have a strong perception of group efficacy (Bandura 1997), an individual's perception that as part of a group they have the power to influence change (Klandermans 2013:215). Empirical studies consistently confirm that the more effective an individual believes their participation will be, the more likely they are to participate in collective action (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Gamson 1968).

In this study, participants not only generally expressed low levels of political efficacy, but also specifically doubted that the movement served as an instrument of change. Many felt that there would never be enough people involved in homesteading practices to make a substantial difference, were ambivalent as to whether homesteading would impact the specific problems about which they were concerned, and rarely believed that their individual actions made much of an impact. These beliefs, again, were unexpected; studies on efficacy have shown that subjective perceptions relevant to participation include beliefs around (Klandermans 1984): A) the extent to which others do and will participate, B) the probability of success if many others do participate, and C) the extent to which one's own contribution matters to the likelihood of success (van Zomeren et al. 2013). These perceptions were rare in interviews.

Certainly, several studies have discovered that perceptions of efficacy play a minimal or secondary role in movement participation for some people and some types of movements. In addition to perceptions of *instrumentality* (the belief that participating will help to achieve some beneficial societal or individual goal), participants often frame their motivations as based in *identity* (the desire to act on behalf of, or express solidarity with, a group) or *ideology* (the desire to make one's life meaningful and an expression of commitments and beliefs) (Klandermans

2004). Participation in movements is not always seen as a means to an end, but can be the end in itself (Jasper 1997). For example, participation in movements can serve not only to express ideas, but also emotions such as “moral outrage” (Goodwin et al. 2001; Nepstad and Smith 2001; Young 2001) or asserting agency (Wood 2001). Additionally, participation can be emotionally motivated by a desire for belonging (Berezin 2001). Relatedly, people don't just join movements because they personally have an interest or stake in the outcome, but also because they identify strongly with the group involved in or impacted by the movement (Simon et al. 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Melucci 1989). Similar to ideological expression, participants can be less concerned with what their participation achieves than with who such participation allows them to be – the identities they affirm or realize through participation (Kaplan and Liu 2000; Klapp 1969; Pinel and Swan 2000). In short, participation can often be expressive rather than instrumental; this insight is nothing new to the field of movements.

Yet, my findings differ from these studies in that efficacy is not irrelevant or ancillary – *inefficacy* appears to be motivating, an important piece of the analytic story. In other words, it is not that perceptions of efficacy were absent from interviews; it was that *inefficacy* was a strong component of interviews, a central part of participants' outlooks. Similarly, it was not just that interviews lacked the active types of emotion typically found in studies of movements; my interviews were full of emotion. Yet, they were full of passive, acquiescent emotions that were unexpected and left unexplained by current theories. These findings elicit questions around not what motivates participation in the absence of efficacy, but more specifically how resignation and inefficacy can serve to motivate movement behavior.

These patterns suggest present a puzzle that cannot be easily explained by scholarship. In the rest of this dissertation, I propose and support an explanation to these patterns – that people

join lifestyle movements when they feel compelled to respond to social problems (or at least able to *account* for their actions as responses to social problems), and yet feel that social change is hopeless. Lifestyle movements, by allowing them to argue that they have removed themselves from unethical or precarious systems, enables people to maintain their identities in the face of emotions and perceptions that threaten them – without requiring them to believe that their actions will “make a difference” institutionally.

Conclusion

It is not necessarily surprising that the stories of participants of lifestyle movements don’t fit the mold of mainstream findings around movements – in fact, that is precisely the point. As I argue in the introduction, building off the work of others, when we broaden the conceptualization of “movement” beyond the assumptions of the contentious politics model, we enter into recognizable but uncharted territory – the better understanding of which speaks to and informs our understanding of movements as a whole.

By extending the definition of movement to accommodate lifestyle movements, for example, we will gain a better understanding of how generally inefficacy and resignation could motivate movement behavior within any movement. By examining a movement in which these perceptions and emotions are particularly accentuated, we better understand these aspects of any movement. In the following chapters, I will show how perceptions of inefficacy threaten one’s identity, and how the ideological accounts given to explain homesteading then help to ease that identity strain. This study thus opened up the opportunity to develop our understanding of the interaction between identity-based, efficacy-based, and ideology-based motivates – responding to calls to better understand these interactions, which are rarely studied empirically (Klandermans 2004). While I could not have predicted the precise ways in which extending the

study of movements would complicate and ultimately deepen theoretical understandings, I argue that broadening the study of movements beyond contentious politics will yield new insights.

These findings also demonstrate how pathways to distinct *forms* of activism may differ – providing insight not into shared processes within all movements, but into how different types of movement strategies and organization may differ from one another in how people come to participate in them. For example, the motivating role of perceptions of group-based anger (van Zomeren et al. 2004) and high levels of collective efficacy are well-established principles of movement theory (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Ennis and Schreuer 1987) – yet, as others have pointed out, these ideas are empirically grounded in narrowly defined forms of movement behavior. Tausch et al. (2011), for example, argue that the relationship between emotions, efficacy, and participation differs by the type of collective action in which people are involved. They contend that efficacy and emotions are typically studied in the context of “normative” movement behavior such as peaceful protest, and demonstrate that in more extreme, non-normative collective action involving violence that contempt⁵ (not anger) and low levels of efficacy (rather than high) are motivating. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that suggest that low, rather than high, levels of efficacy are associated with more extreme activism because people feel that either other channels are closed or ineffective, or that the situation is so bad that they have nothing to lose (e.g. Scheepers et al. 2006; Wright et al. 1990; Ransford 1968). This study strengthens the argument that factors associated with movement participation may differ depending on the type of movement the person joins. Specifically, my findings

⁵ Contempt is defined as entailing “psychological distance from its object and a lack of reconciliatory intentions (Tausch et al. 2011: 130). They argue that anger is more associated with “system supporting” political action, whereas contempt is experienced by individuals who feel disconnected from and unrepresented by the system and thus are more likely to participate in radical action that seeks to “challenge the legitimacy of the current political system and seeks radical social change and reorganization” (142).

suggest that when activism is isolated and private, participation is motivated by an awareness of social problems that evokes emotional responses of hopelessness (rather than anger), and the belief that one's actions do *not* influence social outcomes (rather than high levels of efficacy).

The study of lifestyle movements thus opens new avenues of inquiry around how passive emotions, pessimistic worldviews, and inefficacy can lead to action and not apathy, and why passive emotions and inefficacy are associated with the individualized, private form of activism found in lifestyle movements. These initial findings broadly reinforce the need to expand the empirical study of movements beyond the scope of contentious politics, as doing so can pose new questions, and ultimately answers, about why people participate in movements

CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY STRAIN

"I'm interested in food systems." Carla, an older, small-scale organic farmer tells me when I ask her what she would call her efforts to grow fruits and vegetables and sell seedlings at the Farmer's Market. Unprompted, she then grapples with the question of how to change food systems – and ultimately wonders whether it actually can be changed.

I see what the current food system is, and I'm wondering "What's going on to impact that?" Is there, is there a movement [that will change it]? Or is it individuals who are doing something similar as I'm doing on a bigger scale that somehow participate in that? Or is it a matter of the system being broken and [starts laughing] – and doing it over again? I – that's my kind of negative attitude showing. I kind of do have a, I think the system is broken. I think that we've gone to the way of commercializing everything in terms of food... I think the food system as kind of that – I think it's broken.

Carla situates her homesteading within her interest in food systems, affirming that she sees her efforts as a response to her larger systematic concerns – and expresses her deep pessimism about the state of the food system, wondering if it just needs to be abandoned entirely for an alternative way. I follow up, asking her if she thinks the food system can ever be fixed. She pauses and sighs, then tells me,

Carla: Yes. I mean unless, unless we're just creating an alternate reality in what I think of as the local food movement. The food system, I think [the United States] is [going] the way of the big box store. I mean, clearly.... Do I have hope? I always have hope. But do I really think it's realistic? I guess I don't really know. Because I'm not seeing what's going on in that world. I'm interested in it but kind of don't have a sense of what [long pause.]

Jordan: I phrased that question "Can it be fixed?" Would your answer be different if I asked "Will it be fixed?"

Carla: Yeah, I think "Yes it can be fixed." I wonder if it will. In my lifetime.

In this exchange, Carla expresses her complex – and contradictory – beliefs around whether the food system is something that can be changed. Her direct answer is "Yes," and she describes her own emotions as positive, telling me she "always has hope." Despite these claims, she expresses her doubt that change is possible or "realistic," betraying a more cynical, understated perspective.

Despite Carla's rather pessimistic perceptions of a "broken" system and cynicism that change is "realistic," later in the interview Carla makes clear that she sees herself as neither negative nor resigned. Her perception of her own beliefs and emotions is most clearly seen in her critique of Preppers, a subject I bring up at the end of the interview. I ask her if she would consider Preppers as part of the same movement as her or part of her community. She responds, "I kind of avoid them," and laughs. She tells me about a man she knows that is "one of those people" who always "wants to talk about the economic collapse," telling me,

I don't even have a concept of what that would look like... because it's so nebulous and so negative, I just really can't go there. I just really do not want to have those conversations ... I do have a sense of that prepping mentality coming from a place of fear. As opposed to, as distinct from love. Or trying to change the system that they're gonna be victim of. I mean that that's so much more worthwhile of my human energy and my intellect and my spirit. To contribute something to our world than to like prepare my butt for the big fat collapse.

Contrasting this with her perceptions above, we see an inconsistency between the way she accounts for her homesteading as "trying to change the system" and "contribute something to our world," and her earlier perceptions that it's unlikely to change anything – at most building an alternative and leaving the existing system intact. Similarly, despite a discouraged, resigned tone to the discussion above, she distances herself from negative emotions and espouses positive emotions – she homesteads from a place of love, not fear, and has "hope" for the future, not even *wanting* to imagine some "nebulous, negative" future.

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These contradictions and inconsistencies were laced throughout the majority of interviews. Despite expressing resignation and cynicism about their ability to change the world for the better, participants at some point would account for their homesteading as efforts to evoke social change. As I introduce in the previous chapter, participants told me that their homesteading actions were intended to address social problems, but then hesitatingly admitted they didn't think it actually could or would ever produce change. Participants both held discouraged attitudes about the future and skepticism about their ability to change it, and disavowed and rejected these negative emotions and outlooks, telling me they did not focus on negative futures (despite long spontaneous discussions of gloomy predictions). Participants described themselves and their actions using positive emotional language, claiming as Carla does that they have "hope" despite discussions that would suggest the opposite. These contradictions appeared in various different forms, but were united by a disavowal of pessimism and inefficacy within interviews that were suffused with these perspectives and language.

Interviews punctuated with denials, contradictions, and efforts to de-emphasize pessimism and inefficacy revealed that such perspectives were interpreted as *problematic* to participants – simultaneously experienced and renounced, expressed and minimized. Feeling pessimistic, cynical, and resigned are common features of the social landscape; in and of themselves, they cannot explain why, as I suggest in chapter two, someone would do anything at all. I argue in this chapter that it is specifically the interpretation of pessimism and inefficacy as a problem – a tension to be resolved – that explains how outlooks and emotions typically understood by scholars to be de-motivating can be transformed into something that motivates action.

In this chapter, I extend my claim that inefficacy and pessimism are associated with participation in lifestyle movements to argue that it is not the negative outlooks themselves that motivate participation, but rather an *identity strain* created by these outlooks. I argue that pessimism and inefficacy disrupt or threaten<sup>6</sup> the types of reasons participants typically give to others (and themselves) to explain why they do what they do – their “vocabularies of motive” (VOM). As discussed in the introduction and elaborated more fully later in this chapter, Mills (1940) proposed this concept to call attention to motives as espoused *descriptions* people employ to account for their behavior, as opposed to pre-existing conditions or external factors that cause behavior. Vocabularies of motive are central to one’s self-presentation and thus integral to the way people articulate their identities to themselves and others (Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles 2015). I argue that when pessimism and inefficacy disrupt one’s preferred vocabularies of motive, they are difficult to incorporate into one’s sense of self and cause what I call an *identity strain*. Throughout this dissertation, identity strain is used to refer to the tension that arises when participants hold feelings and perspectives that contradict their self-presented identity. Empirically, identity strain was demonstrated through conflicts and discrepancies between the content of outlooks and accounts, as well as inconsistencies in the way these responses were given. Analytically, the stronger the disjuncture between these discursive elements, the more I considered the interviewee to be experiencing identity strain.

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<sup>6</sup> Here, I use the term “threat” as a verb to indicate that these perceptions pose a potential hazard to participant’s identity, understood as troublesome thoughts and feelings. I do not use the concept of “threat” as it has historically been used within the field of social movements to call attention to the way real (or perceived as real) social conditions evoke movements. The notion of “threat” has historically been part of an argument that “individuals who join social movements often do so because changing social conditions disrupt daily life and either deprive or threaten to deprive citizens’ access to resources, civil liberties, or other public goods” (Johnson and Frickel 2011: 306). While this idea has been a useful analytical concept for studies of movements, in this dissertation I am building on different literatures and ideas, and so do not claim to be drawing on this particular strand of literature by using this term.

Specifically, I argue that when participants' sense of injustice led to the inefficacy and pessimism around the future discussed in the last chapter, these perspectives threatened participants' ability to explain their actions as *conscientious* or *independent* (to themselves and to others). Throughout interviews, participants used the vocabularies of independence and conscientiousness to explain their lives and actions, revealing their socialization into cultures in which such language was central. Conscientiousness and independence, however, are both vocabularies which are undermined by the belief that one is bound to intractable harmful or unstable systems. To feel that systems are *irreparably* meaningless, immoral, precarious, or generally problematic means that one is willingly participating in (for the conscientious) or controlled by (for the independent) the systems against which they situate their identity. And to believe that they have no ability to change these institutions takes away one's sense of control over one's own life for the independent (I am at the whims of a dysfunctional system), and the avenues typically used to demonstrate and understand oneself to be altruistic and conscientious (activism, politics, service). Feeling resigned and disempowered thus hinders participants' ability to draw on the VOMs into which they had been socialized, creating an identity strain in which one's worldview and feelings are at odds with the way one articulates their identity.

In this chapter, I elaborate the nuanced ways in which participants revealed to me their complex relationship with pessimism and inefficacy. I then analyze the way participants' present their identities through the lens of vocabularies of motives. In the juxtaposition between these vocabularies of motives and the negative outlooks discussed in the previous chapter, I construct my argument that pessimism and inefficacy pose a threat to one's vocabularies of motive – and by extension identity. In chapter four, I will build on this foundation to argue that the adoption of contentious ideological accounts to explain one's homesteading practices help to relieve this

identity strain by restoring one's ability to draw on the vocabularies of motive of conscientiousness and independence. The interviews which held the most contradictions between negative outlooks and emotions and positive descriptions and framings (e.g. resignation and empowerment, hopelessness and "saving the world") were also those that held the most articulate, elaborated, coherent, and emphasized ideological accounts of their homesteading. Ultimately, I argue that this shows that these ideological accounts were performing a function for participants' identities by resolving the tension between resigned outlooks and hopeful, empowered vocabularies of motive.

### **Identity Strain: Disavowing Inefficacy and Resignation**

I consider a participant's identity to be strained when they reveal their discomfort with holding thoughts and/or feelings that contradict the way they articulate their identities, and so undermine their ability to claim those identities. The concept of identity strain builds on older work that examines the distress generated when people have characteristics or experiences that undermine the identity they seek to project to others and, accordingly, destabilize their self-concepts. Such work is grounded in Goffman's (1963) landmark work on stigma and spoiled identities that provided the fundamental insight that the person one claims to be, the person others perceive, and the person evidenced by words and action can differ. Goffman pointed out that people seek to align their self-presentation and others' perceptions of them, but that this desired projection is potentially "discreditable" – others could prove them to be something other than they claim to be such that their identity becomes "spoiled" or "stigmatized." A spoiled identity is thus one in which a person is unable to construct a positive self-image because they lose the ability to author their own self-presentation. Despite the identity they seek to project, some stigmatized group identity (e.g. racial groups, homosexuality, mental illness) or personal

characteristic supersedes self-presentation; the identity claimed is not the identity seen. Scholars of movements have drawn on this idea to argue that spoiled personal identities, or perceiving oneself as the object of collective stigmatization, can serve as motivation to participate in social movements (Kaplan and Liu 2000). Specifically, they argue that joining a movement can be a form of coping by identifying with a collective that shares the stigma and works to reshape the stigma as a positive characteristic (Kaplan and Liu 2000).

The concept of identity strain uses such work as a point of departure, but differs in key ways from work on stigma and spoiled identities. I argue that it is participants' awareness that they hold outlooks – emotions and worldviews – that discredit their claims to be certain types of people that generates a form of tension. The key difference, however, between this tension and theories of spoiled or stigmatized identities is that the discrediting characteristics are perspectives and emotions rather than characteristics imposed on them by others. The strain is not evoked by collective stigmatization of their group identities, but rather thoughts and feeling that could potentially discredit their claims to be certain types of people. Still, the central idea of identity strain builds on the foundational work of Goffman (1963) by considering the processes that inhibit people from presenting the identity they seek to project. As I argue more in-depth in chapter four, movement participation can be a way to restore their self-concept and presentation to the identity they wish others to see.

In this section, I analyze evidence of identity strain within interviews, showing the way in which participants constructed pessimism and inefficacy as problematic perspectives, in interviews full of subtle contradictions and denials. First, I analyze the inconsistencies between participants' direct responses to my questions around efficacy and their indirect elaborations on these responses. Then, I detail the strategies participants used to subtly evade the question of



efficacy or provide ambiguous and ambivalent responses. Lastly, I show that participants worked to claim positive emotions and perspectives, despite expressing negative outlooks throughout the interview, by adopting optimistic emotional language to describe themselves and reframing resigned outlooks as positive. I argue that these hesitations, contradictions, ambivalent responses, and denials show that pessimism and inefficacy were difficult for participants to incorporate into their narratives of who they are and why they do what they do.

First, many of the participants I described in the previous chapter, whose interviews were suffused with a negative and cynical perspective, perplexingly responded positively to my direct question as to whether homesteading impacts or helps to solve social problems. Despite this “party line” response, their more negative, unacknowledged perspective dominated the interview in terms of time and emphasis. These exchanges revealed that many interviewees did not want to acknowledge their negativity, did not want to think of themselves as resigned or admit to others this perspective, or did not see these perspectives as central to their worldviews (despite being central to the interview).

For example, when I ask Emily if homesteading addressed the issues in market culture, the environment, or globalization – issues she has brought up – she immediately replies, “Yeah I think so. Um, or *I’d like to think so.*” This initial response suggests that this is the account with which she is comfortable and would prefer to give; she would like to think that homesteading made an impact. Immediately, though, she elaborated this answer in ways that suggest that she does not believe homesteading can effect change:

I think it definitely has a long way to go. Um, [laughs] and maybe this is me being too pessimistic, [but] I don't think it's ever gonna overcome those forces in the way that certain folks would like and that I would like. It's certainly not going to stop the acceleration of, you know, certain market forces. Um, it's not gonna stop it.

... Um, what it can do is put little hiccups in it ... in terms of like pushing against things like market forces and things like that. But then what you find – this is what's so fascinating – is then that you find like market forces then kind of pick up on that and use that to their own advantage, right? So you go to Starbucks and they say "Yes our coffee's more expensive, but, when you, you know pay ten extra cents, then we're gonna donate that to this farmer here." So it's already like building in your alleviation from guilt over buying that coffee into your purchase already. So they know that, and they play upon that ... It's terrible but I do think the consumer culture we have is so keyed in to what makes us tick, even when we push back against it then it becomes like a way for them to utilize that psyche. Yeah, so, I'm extremely pessimistic about that.

Despite the fact that Emily's answer was "yes," homesteading can affect change, she immediately follows this with her perceptions that to the extent that homesteading can impact the "market forces" with which she's concerned, she is "pessimistic" that these market forces will not simply just use this "to their own advantage." Emily also tells me that she's "too pessimistic" and "terrible" for thinking the way that she does, showing that she is uncomfortable with thinking (or admitting to) this perspective. Kylah responded in a very similar way, immediately answering my question with "yes," but then following this up with:

I don't think it's enough. Um, I think that we need really big sweeping changes. Um, and so many food corporations have such a stronghold in American politics that [laughs] it's really hard to change things on that level. I think it's really – I think it's possible. I think it's really difficult.

Similarly, Kylah tells me that homesteading can impact change, that this is possible, but in her elaboration provides me a more negative perspective. These sorts of exchanges reveal a level of unease with cynicism and resignation, and desire to project oneself as more hopeful and positive.

Moreover, participants who do more directly respond negatively to my questions around efficacy incorporate caveats or disclaimers, refusing to fully embrace a more negative perspective. For example, when I ask Nathan if homesteading "impacts any of the issues or problems" that he had been discussing, he tells me,

I don't think it has a huge impact. I mean (Michelle: Yeah I would agree with that.) *it might be a growing impact* ... But no I don't think it's impactful. I don't think it's got a huge impact. *But I think it's, you know, maybe it will?*

Despite a view that homesteading is a response rather than a strategy to effect change, Nathan qualifies his statements with positive claims. Similarly, when Thomas offers to me that he doesn't "necessarily have any faith that [homesteading] ... is going to be successful at all," I ask him directly, "So why do it?" He responds,

I mean I think it can evolve. I think it can evolve to something else that might be successful. And I think, it could possibly still be successful as is. I mean it could just, prices will go down because of increased volume. And the model could be reproduced to such an extent that it actually feeds everybody.

But I guess I have a tiny bit of faith in that. Um, and then I would say too it's just, one is just my philosophy, like you can't give up. Or like you gotta fight for something good or do something good in your life even if you're not certain of the outcome.

This response uncovers Thomas' ambivalence around whether homesteading will impact anything, but even more importantly his rejection of the question. It doesn't matter if homesteading will make a difference because "you gotta fight for something good in your life even if you're not certain of the outcomes.

In another pattern that exposed some participants' discomfort with perceptions with inefficacy, people interpreted my question in ways that allowed them the opportunity to respond positively. For example, when I asked some participants whether homesteading could impact whatever problems they had discussed in the interview, they would respond that they could see that the homesteading lifestyle was growing rather than discuss the outcome of this growth. For example, when I ask Tracy if homesteading impacts the bigger picture of the problems in the food system she'd been discussing, she responds

Mmhhh, I do. (How so?) I mean it's, it's-- um, I think because, um, because I think, I think for this whole thing to work, for sustainability to work, there needs to be, um, lots of, of small farmers.... I mean it, what shows to me that we're

part of a bigger picture is just that people want what we have and people are excited that we're doing what we're doing.

Here, Tracy redirects the question to matters of growth, rather the outcomes achieved by the movement. Similarly, some participants would tell me that they find homesteading a successful strategy in the sense that people involved in homesteading would no longer be impacted by the problems they perceived, leaving intact their beliefs that problems would continue to progress and worsen, unhampered by homesteading efforts. These sorts of responses show how participants explain their homesteading in ways that allow them to bypass the question of institutional efficacy altogether, offering positive responses that do not directly answer the question.

Some of the most positive responses I received essentially asserted that homesteading could indirectly effect change through providing a model for others on how to live, or providing a lifestyle that could shape the strategies of other movements or institutions. What I find interesting about these responses is the pivot of the question to allow them to respond positively. I was careful to try to ask questions around efficacy as whether homesteading could impact things on a social or institutional level; rather than being satisfied with telling me “no” many participants continued until they rendered their response positive – even if, when reading between the lines, participants had told me that homesteading didn’t affect change. For example, Todd explains first why he thinks homesteading can’t work to address problems, but then works to restore positive impacts to homesteading, situating it as an indirect step on a pathway to change. When I ask him if homesteading can effect change, he tells me,

Well, it [pause] it’s I – I guess yes and no. Um, I mean it’s, it’s I think it’s intended to solve problems ... I don’t think that would work very well...So, so I don’t think homesteading is the answer. But I think it holds some information or – I think there’s two things. I think you could learn from it and try and apply that at a larger scale... I think that’s even more valuable of a lifestyle is an example to people that there’s other ways of living that are really satisfying.

That aren't so resource intensive. And that's really important. Not to say that you should live this way but you can live this way and have a great life. Just letting other people see that there's different possibilities.

This response shows both that Todd does not feel like homesteading is “the” answer, but also that he did not want that negative response to be his full response. He kept elaborating how homesteading could serve as a model for a larger approach or for a more satisfying individual life. Other participants brought up these sorts of responses as well, although several of them did not close the loop to return to the original question of institutional impact. They, for example, told me that homesteading had the potential to impact individuals and change their outlooks or behaviors, but did not then discuss how these individual changes would influence larger institutions. These responses subtly change my question to something to which participants can respond positively.

The discomfort with pessimism and inefficacy showed up not only in discussions of efficacy, but also in the way that participants worked to claim positive emotions and distance themselves from negative emotions – even those that were strongly apparent in their perspectives. For example, see the way that Lindsey expresses a very deep resignation about the state and future of the government, but then claims that she always has “hope.”

[The government is promoting] – whether it intends to or not – systems that are gonna be our demise. I mean whether that's the healthcare system or the agricultural systems... I think we're gonna, things are gonna be bad for a while. *Um, but I don't know. I mean, that's not to say I'm unhopeful, I do think change could happen.* But I just think, I don't know. It's naive to say “If everybody had a garden... “cause I don't think it's even possible because there's just so many people reliant on the system as it is.

In the face of negative predictions about the future, Lindsey still claims she has “hope,” reasserting her status as a positive person and revealing the tension she feels with feeling resigned. As a last example, when I ask Julia, deeply critical of several American systems, if she thinks things have been getting better or worse, she initially responds confidently “Getting better.

Air quality is improving, I think awareness of local, sustainable farm practices is improving, I think the availability of quality food is improving. Definitely. I feel hopeful about all of that.” Despite this initial confidence, after a long pause, she mutters, “Monsanto seems to be working really hard to clamp it down in the other direction. But, anyway [laughs].” In this, we see the type of response she espouses – hope, confidence – followed immediately by a response she expresses but seeks to verbally sweep under the rug by laughing and letting me know she’d prefer to move on to another topic by saying “But anyway.”

One of the most evident ways in which participants claimed positive emotional identities and disavowed their negative perspectives was seen in those interviewees who used all of the language of the Prepper movement but refused to identify as such because they perceived that movement as too negative or “dark” (Julia). For example, Peter tells me

Peter: I think that ... there will be – I mean I believe there will be serious problems. I’m not a Survivalist, I’m not a Prepper, I’m none of those people. But I think that a very serious kind of revolt, revolution, could come to this country ... And I think it’s gonna be between the haves and have nots ...

Jordan: Earlier when you said ... “But I’m not a Prepper and I’m not a Survivalist,” can you tell me more about why you don’t identify with those terms?

Peter: Um, no. It’s just I’m – well one, I suppose *I’m an optimist rather than a pessimist*... It’s just the way I am. So I’m not at all attracted to that sort of ideology.

Peter, despite his gloomy perspective of the future, sees himself as an “optimist” rather than a “pessimist,” and so does not consider himself a Prepper. Similarly, although John told me during the interview that he thinks we’re not far from a “catastrophe” in food, his wife Lynn explains that Preppers are “people who live in fear. We don’t live in fear, we’re not afraid. This is a positive thing.”

Dean and Lindsey's interview echo these sentiments. Despite her assertion in the example above that she always has "hope," Lindsey's interview is anything but hopeful. After Dean, her husband, tells me that homesteading would not "fix" the food system, Lindsey tells me, "I think, honestly I think where we're headed, it will come to a point where the only people who survive are the people who [homestead]. [Laughs.] That's what I think. We're in a downward spiral." She describes this downward spiral in some detail, telling me that the

agricultural system is sort of self-imploding right now. We're killing off all the bees, we're creating plants that are – who knows what they're doing to us health-wise, and they can't reproduce naturally. I mean we're just, everything we're doing is just not sustainable and so eventually is gonna break down. And when that comes to a head, the people who rely on that source for food are gonna be in trouble. And they're either gonna learn how to fend for themselves or associate with someone who does, or, you know... That's my prediction.

Despite these pessimistic predictions, when Lindsey brings up the subject of Preppers later in the interview unprompted, Dean and Lindsey tell me they choose not to focus on negativity.

Lindsey: ... we don't have a whole lot of Prepper friends.

Jordan: Why do you think that is?

Dean: 'Cause they're crazy. [Laughs]

Lindsey: Because we don't believe in sensationa – I mean it's not that you shouldn't be prepared, but to focus on that as a daily routine is really, really depressing. [Laughs] So, I mean you do have to kind of make a concerted effort to not to do that, because the world can be a little scary.

Jordan: A concerted effort to not do what?

Lindsey: Focus on --

Dean: The demise of society. [Laughs]

Lindsey: – the end of times, yeah. We have no way of really knowing that for sure. But, we do know what impact we can have, and what legacy we can leave. And that means improving what we teach our children and do for ourselves. I mean my hope is that we're able to turn it around instead of it going downhill. I mean that's definitely – even though I feel like it's unlikely, it's still in the back of my mind. If enough people, yeah, I think it's gonna take a lot of people

separating themselves from what they're comfortable with and that's not comfortable. [Laughs] I don't know, what do you think the likelihood is?

This exchange aptly illustrates threads that ran through many of my interviews. Participants felt disheartened, sometimes deeply so, and would often spontaneously elaborate these perspectives at some length. Yet in describing their personalities or selves or in discussing their identities, they distance themselves from these perspectives, telling me that they choose not to focus on the negativity or make these perspectives central to their outlooks.

This sort of willful, deliberate denial of the pessimistic outlooks they hold reveals that negative emotions and perspectives were something participants seek to reject, even if they feel them. For example, I ask Lucky if homesteading is helping or changing anything, and he responds,

I don't know. It seems like Monsanto's getting bigger and stronger all the time and now I think someone who used to be a lobbyist for Monsanto is now head of the Food and Drug Administration or something, or head of department of Agriculture. I mean even though a lot of people thought politically Obama was gonna be a godsend it seems like he's making some pretty poor choices. I guess the guy who used to be head of the lobbying division for Comcast or something is now in now in charge of the Federal Communications Administration. So just little things that keep on happening that are very disturbing, you know, to watch. And so, I don't know.

I mean is it having a positive effect? Yeah, maybe. At least it's making me feel more positive about what I'm doing. There are times when this, you know, when, when I look around and see what's going on that you can actually become really despondent. You can go, "God this is ugly." You know? It's a really, really tough place that we're growing up and my kids are seeing this stuff. *You know, but you can also choose to change your focus and try and make something positive happen. So if I'm gonna do anything, you know, I want to try and do something positive.* So that's just kind of my out.

In this quote, Lucky primarily expresses resignation and cynicism, his sense that things are going downhill and beyond his ability to control, making him "despondent." But he ultimately rejects these emotions, telling me he focuses on doing something positive. In this, he shows that he



finds his sense of resignation problematic, that he feels “despondent” about the state of the world but chooses to essentially look the other way.

A last pattern that revealed participants’ discomfort with inefficacy and pessimistic perspectives were efforts to reframe negativity as positivity by portraying system failure as necessary for social change. After Todd tells me that he “doesn’t hold out” for poverty and inequality, the environment, or the government to get any better, but that what we “need” is

... a little bit of creative destruction. Where we have some falling apart of the government... That's kind of scary. But I know that there's some benefits in that. This idea of creative destruction is that you tear down at a system. And solutions arise out of that; it's the phoenix rising from the ashes.

This logic asserts that not only will things get worse before they get better, but that things must get worse for things to get better, recasting gloomy predictions as necessary for a more hopeful future. Several participants explain this logic to me by arguing that things must get really bad to prompt people to act, to “shock” them into change, as Blake tells me. As John explains, “So that would be one thing that would change the whole approach is a very large catastrophe. And people would wake up I think.” According to John, people need to experience disaster to “wake up.” Angie applies this same logic to the food system, telling me,

I think we're gonna get worse before we get better. I think we're going to have to experience some pretty traumatic food system problems before it gets better. [This catastrophe would mean that] people are gonna have to acknowledge that ... our current production system is in some way responsible for some of our health problems. And the science is starting to show that. But it has not yet done so to a point yet where people are alarmed enough by it.

People will not act until they are “alarmed” at the state of the world, which will only occur should things get really bad. As Peter, the “optimist” mentioned above, sums up, “I’m not gonna see in my lifetime much change I don’t think. Unless it gets bad.” A related sort of reasoning told to me by a handful of participants, in which people sought to reframe negative beliefs as positive, was the idea that what appeared bad for humanity in the long run would be good for the

environment; as Julia tells me “I came to this peace within myself that ... if people end, I’m not sure that would be the worst thing for the planet.” In other words, they imposed moral relativism on their negative perspectives in a way that enabled them not to focus on pessimism.

These interviews, which exemplify larger patterns found throughout my interviews, construct inefficacy and pessimism as problematic – something from which participants seek to distance themselves, something they reject. Participants described themselves, their outlooks, and their emotions in positive ways that left inefficacy and pessimism unacknowledged, and in many cases actively denounced any such negative perspectives. In the rest of this chapter, I seek to explain this pattern and understand why inefficacy and pessimism are disavowed by participants.

### **Vocabularies of Motive**

I argue that negative outlooks were interpreted as problematic because they contradicted key aspects of participants' identities – specifically, their vocabularies of motive (VOM). As I briefly discuss in the introduction to this dissertation, I realized in my analysis of interviews that despite a wide range of espoused personal and collective identities, participants shared a common language. Overwhelmingly, they explained their behavior to me – the way they decided to raise their children, the reason they dropped out of college, why they ended up in certain jobs, why they read particular news websites – as a function of their independence and/or their conscientiousness. C. Wright Mills (1940) called these shared framings of ones' motives “vocabularies of motive” (VOM) – those socially available and acceptable vocabularies from which people draw to explain their behavior. In doing so, he sought to render motives as sociological rather than psychological in nature, as motives are often understood as personality

traits or states of mind that precede action. Mills argued that motives are better understood as the meaning given to behavior, socially constructed within particular social and historical contexts.

Mills' argument built on earlier social psychological perspectives that called attention to motives as linguistic devices used to account for behavior, rather than reified forces that compel people to act (Burke 1936, 1945, 1950). When, for example, a person says that they "felt called" to become a pastor, they draw on the language of religious communities to explain vocation. They learned this language from the communities in which they participate, and know that in that setting that vocabulary of motive is understood and accepted. If that same person were speaking with a politically engaged nonreligious friend, they might tell them that they became a pastor because they wanted to inspire others to change the world for the better. Motives are descriptions used situationally and learned socially.

As Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles (2015) point out, vocabularies of motive are "constitutive elements" of identity. "When individuals express motives for their actions," they write, "they are not only giving meaning to such actions but also expressing the type of persons they are, their moral quality and their group membership" (Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles 2015, drawing on Voysey 1975). I follow this approach in viewing vocabularies of motives as ways to "articulate a sense of the self" – extensions of participants' self-concepts, group membership, and the cultures into which they have been socialized (Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles 2015). Because vocabularies of motives and identity are inextricably intertwined, I understand the vocabularies participants used to reveal key aspects of their personal identities. While such identities are personal rather than group-based, they are collective in that they are shared, socially learned and situationally available, and thus comprise shared identities among participants.

I contend that focusing on vocabularies of motives rather than personal or collective identity categories or classifications is a theoretical contribution to the field of movements. A focus on such vocabularies paints a more complex picture of participants, leaving open the possibility that people may use similar languages and ideas, despite describing themselves with different labels and ascribing to different political ideologies. Analyzing vocabularies of motive thus allow participants to share socially-constructed components of their identities with people with whom they would not recognize themselves as sharing common ground, and thus not include in their collective identities. Such a focus also calls attention to how identity can motivate participation in movements through challenges to or amplifications of the meaning-making processes that extend from particular identities, focusing on identity as process rather than a static grouping or label.

Finally, I argue that analyzing vocabularies of motives provides a window into participants' socialization prior to joining the movement, responding to calls that researchers should seek to take a life course perspective in understanding movement participation (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Zald 2000). Previous work has examined how pre-movement socialization into "prosocial orientations" (Penner and Finkelstein 1998) or beliefs around the goodness of activism (Braungart and Braungart 1992; Lewis and Kraut 1972; Flacks 1967) intersect with movement participation. In contrast to and extension of this research, analyzing vocabularies of motives illuminates how socialization that is not directly related to protest or politics can influence the probability of later participation. Admittedly, given that the VOM analytical framework posits motives as descriptions of behavior rather than pre-existing conditions that cause behavior, it is possible that participants adopted particular vocabularies of motives after

joining the homesteading movement<sup>7</sup> and then reframed the stories of their lives and decisions through this lens. Yet the data suggests that participants were socialized into these vocabularies of motive long before they adopted the homesteading lifestyle, and in the following sections I work to illuminate some of the sources of these vocabularies of motives – including families, churches, communities, and institutions of higher education.

The vocabularies of motive that were drawn on by participants to explain their actions, discussed more in-depth below, were (1) vocabularies of *conscientiousness*, in which personal actions are accounted for as deliberate choices made in the context of one’s understanding of societal-level issues and problems; and (2) vocabularies of *independence*, in which personal actions are accounted for as individually determined, unconstrained or unaided by societal-level issues, decisions, cultures, or problems. I argue that when these vocabularies of motive are central to one’s identity in that they form master vocabularies through which most actions are explained, people feel compelled to respond to perceptions of injustice at an institutional level – or at least be able to account for their behaviors as such. In the first of these vocabularies, individuals must respond to societal-level issues to contribute to and align themselves with the “right” cultures and systems in order to be good, authentic people; in the second, individuals must respond to societal-level issues to disentangle themselves from the influence of society’s constraining cultures and systems in order to be self-reliant, self-determined individuals. To be clear, these VOMs were used not only to explain homesteading practices, but were accounts by which participants explained their lives more generally – for example, why they quit jobs, or

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<sup>7</sup> For example, studies have found that participants can come to feel aggrieved through their participation in a movement (e.g. Blee 2002); participants can come to identify with a movement after joining it (Kitchell et al. 2000; Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Corrigan-Brown 2012); or can reframe the stories of their lives in new terms after joining a movement (Snow and Phillips 1980). In all of these examples, the motives were learned or developed after joining the movement.

enrolled their children in certain schools or homeschooled them – and the lens through which they understood each other’s motives. What might appear to be conflicting VOMs are drawn on simultaneously by participants, who explain their actions as efforts to align themselves with certain systems and remove themselves from others. In the following pages, I discuss each of these VOMs in turn, analyzing how participants drew on these vocabularies and revealed their centrality to their identity, as well as how pessimism or inefficacy are troublesome or problematic.

As forms of individualism, these vocabularies of motives are common forms of American language, deeply rooted in the culture of the US. Several landmark sociological interview studies have similarly found that people – at least white, middle-class people – draw on individualistic ideas and framings in their discussions of everything ranging from love (Swidler 2001) to class (Lamont 2000) to citizenship and the common good (Bellah et al. 1985). However, these VOM, though clearly rooted in individualism, are more specific narratives that offer explanations for how to navigate public and private life, and what it means to be a citizen. Vocabularies of conscientiousness reconcile the tension between individualism and a desire for altruism, granting private life a public purpose. Vocabularies of independence trace notions of citizenship to individual freedom by claiming that healthy societies emerge from individual autonomy. These vocabularies thus build on previous work by showing specifically how people orient and relate individualist ideologies to the public good and collective life.

Methodologically, it took some time to develop these categories, as doing so required me think outside of the liberal/conservative binary. Originally, I had a much longer, laundry list of vocabularies of motives – ranging from social justice to individual freedom to spirituality to informed decisions to environmentalism to personal responsibility. As I discussed earlier, these

vocabularies were inductively built from the way people discussed themselves, and accordingly I initially used their own language and phrasing. The ability to see underlying connections between so many more specific vocabularies was challenging. Seeing, for example, that a discussion of oneself as a hippie that sought to engage in alternative ways of living, and discussions of oneself as a maverick who voted across the political spectrum because one was a free-thinker, were each explanations of oneself as a nonconformist – and the underlying expression of individualism embedded in each motive – broke down my pre-conceived notions of liberal/conservative groupings. As another example, it took time to see that explanations of all of one's actions as motivated by the Holy Spirit, and one's actions as driven by an effort to live sustainably in all respects, were each expressions of a language of authenticity – and an underlying emphasis on conscientiousness. While I played with different overarching master concepts to organize vocabularies – such as, for example, altruism, purpose, or self-sufficiency – I knew that I had discerned the most useful analytical concepts when these vocabularies could condense and organize the much longer list of vocabularies I had initially created. Moreover, I knew that conscientiousness and independence were the vocabularies that were the best conceptual fit for the data when in new interviews I no longer identified specific vocabularies of motive that did not fit into this schema.

### ***Vocabularies of Conscientiousness***

In the first vocabulary of motive, participants used motives of *conscientiousness*. While this vocabulary took a few different forms – meaningful, authentic, intentional, or altruistic – all versions reflected socialization into the belief that the personal *must* be explicitly political. Participants using this vocabulary accounted for their lives as an accumulation of personal decisions in which each action was in response to and in the context of one's broader worldview

and commitments. For many, this took the shape of explaining their lives as embodying their commitment to others, in which decisions were defended as intended for the good of the community or world more broadly. In the use of these sorts of vocabularies, participants expressed a desire to account for their lives as a response to societal-level issues, only participating in what they understand to be ethical, morally right systems.

I argue that when participants come to feel like they are a part of larger systems that are devoid of meaning or immoral, and yet lose faith in their ability to meaningfully impact such systems, they are threatened with the loss of their use of the VOM of conscientiousness. If the larger system is irreparably unethical, one's participation within it means that one is by extension unethical. One's participation in larger systems cannot be ignored given this VOM, as the conscientious person frames personal actions as situated within larger contexts, making them complicit within such problems. After analyzing how participants repeatedly drew on the VOM of conscientiousness, I discuss how pessimism and inefficacy are inconsistent with, and thus problematic, to this vocabulary.

### *A Meaningful Life*

Participants accounted for their lives and actions as efforts to live out a "meaningful life" - one which is constructed around and expresses a moral code or narrative. Interviews were infused with references to the importance of "standing on principle" (Isaac) or living by one's "convictions" (Kristin) or the importance of having "beliefs" in something "concrete" (Hannah). In the way that these interviewees explained their lives and decisions, they took pains to describe how each component of their life was meaningful, symbolic of something larger than the practices themselves. These larger meanings were often religious, sometimes political, sometimes



cultural, but the overarching theme was that decisions were framed as connecting with larger ideologies and principles – rather than fun, enjoyment, financial reasons, social pressure, etc.

Churches and religious organizations appeared as influences in developing this vocabulary of motive. In the quote below, Lem discusses how religious institutions taught him to value intentionality and ideological consistency, “framing” his life through a “theological lens.”

I spent a lot of time in a church. And then a lot of time sort of doing different activities with Young Life with my parents. So I was, I was taught to think theologically like from a young age. Just in the sense that I was trying to make sense of like my life and my experiences through a theological lens. Like is this what God wants me to do? Who is God? You know, what – sort of this, like that's the ethical framework that I was sort of operating inside of.

Religious institutions appeared to play a key role in developing vocabularies of conscientiousness, teaching people the importance of describing the small decisions of their daily lives in the context of and consistent with their larger ideologies.

The ways in which participants drew on this vocabulary of motive was perhaps most evident in the ways they discussed their jobs – which were never simply ways to earn an income, but rather self-actualizing pursuits or “passions” with a higher purpose. As Lem explained, he and his wife combined their homesteading efforts with work outside the home because,

... we both work to make money but that, our goal is not necessarily to both work so that we can make a lot of money and enjoy a lot of pleasures. But it's to work so that we can both do something meaningful that we enjoy to do. And contribute to the community.

Lem frames his work as more than an effort to make money, but as an extension of his desire to do something consequential with his time. When participants did not perceive their jobs to be meaningful, the desire to account for one's life using this vocabulary of meaning was most evident. For example, Keith had recently started working in marketing – a job shift that came after a period in which his marriage and family life were being torn apart from the low wages and long hours of working as a community organizer. He told me that marketing was not

“sustainable” for him “emotionally and spiritually.” When I asked him to tell me more, he told me,

Yeah, so, I mean, um [pause] marketing...my jobs prior to this connected with my own kind of personal sense of meaning and purpose and mission. This, this doesn't. This intersects with my sense of responsibility and desire to provide for the family and create a good situation for us. But, it doesn't connect with anything I'm really passionate about.

To Keith, holding a job to support a family was not enough, was not “sustainable” for him; as did the majority of interviewees, he wanted his job to be an expression of his values and passions.

Additionally, participants accounted for the changes in their lives as choices motivated by their desire to live a more meaningful life – even in those cases in which a range of factors and influences constrained these “choices.” Rick for example tells me that he “dropped out” of the “corporate world” because

I just didn't feel like there was meaning in my life. There was – the meaning was missing. There was a sense of – I just felt, yeah there was the deep, something deep and meaningful and nurturing and soulful was not there. And I craved it. So, I dropped out. And, um, being on the land is a way for me to connect with the Earth Mother. It's a way for me to, it's an outward manifestation of my inner life.

Rick is very clear and articulate that his shift from the corporate world to a life of homesteading was motivated by a desire to fill a void of meaning. While this is his account for this shift, during the course of our conversation he also tells me that he didn't feel successful in the position, that others were advancing more quickly than he was, that he felt unhappy and like a “cog in the machine,” and he seemed unsatisfied with that position because the benefits and environment didn't compare to the company for whom he had previously worked. Despite these factors, his explanation remains one of seeking meaning.

This VOM of “meaning” was a more fundamental vocabulary than specific narratives. Participants were not necessarily loyal to one moral code or belief system, which for several

participants moved and shifted over time from one set of principles to another. Several, for example, serially participated in lifestyle movements – as Nathan, tells me, he “experiments with different lifestyles.” Similarly, Todd tells me that he at some point was involved in the goth scene, hipster culture, asceticism, personal growth and healthy living, thought of himself as a “revolutionary,” became a “doomer” concerned about peak oil, and ultimately came to practice homesteading and permaculture. For these participants, the goal is less about the specific lifestyle and more about the ability to claim that there is a coherent layer of meaning on daily living. These lifestyle transitions demonstrated to me that people felt more strongly about being able to explain their lives as aligning to some code – any code – than about sticking to any one narrative. Rick, who story helped open this dissertation, helps to demonstrate this notion. In the introduction, I briefly mentioned that Rick initially identified as an environmentalist who understood his homesteading efforts as a way to construct a model of sustainability, but now sees the “spiritual aspect” of homesteading to be more important than sustainability. In the interview, he tells me,

I think homesteading is kind of the lifestyle of the one who wants to be connected to the earth... That's like the material manifestation of a oneness paradigm. Because what you're, what you're saying by your lifestyle is that you're, you're connected to everything. You're not apart from anything. That you're part of life. That life lives you. That you are no different than the sentient creatures and insects and things on the land.

Later, he explains how this spiritual purpose replaced his environmentalist purpose:

So, the ultimate gift that I give, that I want to give, that is going to be the mission of my life – isn't gonna be environmental guru dude. Mission of my life is see people for what they are and uplift them into a recognition of something more beautiful.

So, it wasn't so much about *how* his life was meaningful, but that his life was meaningful in some capacity. The significance could change, as long as the lifestyle was symbolic.

Several participants discussed such transitions. Moreover, in time periods when participants cease to believe in or ascribe to one ideology, they intentionally seek out another to fill the void – deliberately finding another narrative or purpose through which they could frame their actions. For example, when Chad and Laurie lost their “fundamentalist” Christian faith, they lost their ability to explain their decisions as and lifestyle choices – including homesteading – as meaningful, sparking a period of re-education and meaning-seeking until they found a new narrative through which to frame their actions. Up until a few years ago, Chad and Laurie tell me that “every decision we ever made was based on Jesus, Christianity, the Bible,” including homesteading, which Chad said they would have originally explained as doing “Because it’s God’s handiwork. It’s his creation. It’s like His painting and ... I want to care for it... It’s meant to bring Glory to him.” Yet, through the process of adopting five Black or biracial children and then moving into a low-income neighborhood, they tell me they came to experience racial discrimination in a fundamentally different way and identify with the poor. The more their own politics changed, the more they disagreed with their pastor’s political stances, cause them to leave the church, and ultimately Christianity. They describe their transition from losing their faith as extremely difficult and sad, in which they felt a loss of meaning and then went through an intentional process of figuring out who they were and how they should understand the world.

You know, once all the theological reasons for growing stuff goes away and once you kind of, once all the, the supernaturalism and stuff dissipated, well you’re left with the question of “What is? What is my worldview? Who am I?” ... and what I know is to the best of my ability, you know, the dirt is there. And the plants are there. And I’m in an ecosystem and in a universe... I’m essentially a naturalist I guess at that point. So I’m dealing with what is. ... I care about my kids, I want them to have a planet that’s not completely jacked up. (Chad)

This process of replacing their Christian story with “naturalism” was an intentional, deliberate process. They read books, joined online communities, listened to podcasts, and sought out new friendships in an effort to replace what had been lost. This demonstrates the importance of

having an ideology in which to frame the small, everyday decisions of one's lifestyle. Chad and Laurie were not satisfied with thinking of their homesteading as hobby, but took pains to find a new way to make it symbolically significant and purposeful.

Various interviewees describe what I came to think of as "purpose-seeking" ventures, a deliberate search for a larger purpose to life. For example, after Randy and his wife felt that their lives were overly conventional and focused on money, they started to "look for methodologies" by which to live differently, temporarily living in a camper in an effort to live closer to the Tiny Home movement principles, buying land, and ultimately deciding to become goat farmers. Heidi traveled and lived in intentional communities after her car wreck prompted her to "to go find out what seemed more viable" and "explore different places and different ways of doing things."

### Authenticity

Participants not only accounted for their lives and histories as aligned with some narrative or moral code, but felt that these narratives must be consistent in every habit, practice, choice, and statement. They strived for coherency and integrity – in which all actions and practices express one's commitments. Participants attributed the most minute details of their lives as efforts to more fully live out the larger narratives to which they subscribe. In particular, I saw this vocabulary of motive play out in interviews in participants' evaluation of *others'* perceived motives. In spontaneous, unprompted discussions, participants spent much time gauging the authenticity of others, appraising their authenticity by casting judgment on how well their actions line up with their espoused values. In the following, I analyze the way participants drew on this vocabulary of authenticity.

I see the emphasis placed on authenticity throughout my conversation with Peter, a semi-retired academic who is currently involved in the formation of a new eco-village. When he

mentions that he feels a sense of “personal responsibility” toward dealing with issues of climate change and I ask him to elaborate, after a lengthy discussion he wraps up by telling me, “So, so my politics gets wrapped up in my personal life choices. Which I guess is important. All of us, my belief is all of us should be living that way – You know, what do you stand for ought to be reflected in your life.” Later in the interview, when I ask him why it’s important to attend Moral Monday rallies if he feels they don’t affect anything, he tells me, “I want to live a life that reflects the fact that I am opposed to [war],” which he describes as one of his key beliefs. This sentiment – that’s one’s life should “reflect” one’s politics and beliefs – pervaded interviews in more or less explicit ways. Participants would often explain the pieces of their lives as efforts to better reflect their foundational principles. For example, Rick tells me that he built his straw-bale house in an effort to “create something authentic that’s an extension of myself,” reflecting his environmental, and then spiritual, values.

I saw the importance of authenticity in large part through interviewees’ evaluations and judgments of *others*, in their spontaneous comments on how well they believe others lived out their espoused values or commitments, judging motives against this criteria of authenticity. Interviewees would position themselves against real or imagined others that they considered to be “posers,” hypocrites, extremists, or overly purist. These nods to authenticity often played out in critiques of those perceived to be *inauthentic*. Consider the similarities in the way that Bob, Lynn, and Rick discuss the motives of others in the following quotes:

Bob: Yeah ... I was always following politics and talking about politics... I like making a difference and changing things. I don't want to be just like that, you know, the bar stool philosopher types. You know? 'Cause I know plenty of people like that. They'll argue, spend all day arguing some minor political or philosophical point and then not do anything about it. I'm like "fuck that noise."

Lynn: [I liked the Quakers because of] the lack of hypocrisy. Because so much of religion says one thing and they do, and does another. Quakers have an expression "Let your lives speak." And it doesn't mean that you don't meet

people who aren't doing that very consistently within the religious Society of Friends, but in general we felt that there was a greater commitment to attempting to live a life that was consistent with their beliefs and practices and their values. That they tried to really practice what they preached.

Rick: [Telling me about going to see a movie about the shrinking of glaciers] So the people are really – smart people get it. And they're like "Shit, that's fucked up, we gotta do something about that" alright? ... [But] if I were to go through that auditorium and interview those people...there might be-might be a 1% difference in the way they live their lives and the way the person who doesn't give a flying fuck lives their lives. They're still driving their car like crazy. They're still living in a big house with air-conditioning cranked, with the heat cranked, ok? ... Bottom line is that very, very, very few people actually want to bring their existence fully into alignment with a kind of sustainable outlook.

While they are discussing different principles – political, religious, and environmental – in all of these examples interviewees critique real or imagined others for not acting on their expressed beliefs. This general critique infused interviews, showing the emphasis participants placed on values-driven motives consistent with larger ideologies.

This emphasis on authenticity in many cases led to what I came to think of as “identity competitions” – those contests in which participants discussed who best expressed their values and thus had the purest motives. For example, Christine tells me the following story:

I got into with, well a vegan got into it with me. After she bought a jar of my honey. I'm like "You're a vegan but you just bought my honey." Ok. Awesome. Produced by an animal, you know that right? So she was telling me how horrible it was that I raise animals for meat. And how much healthier her living was for the environment. And I looked at her and I said "We live in Boston. We live in the Northeast with a growing season of about four months. How are you growing your own food?" [pause] "Well I'm not." "Ok, so, my chickens that are raised 500 ft. from my door who are pasture raised, eating grass – you're gonna tell me *I'm* a horrible person for producing my food, but you grow none of your own food?" And that quinoa you're so keen to eat in the middle of January, isn't at all local or sustainably grown ...

In this story, Christine points out how she better ascribes to the principle of living sustainably than this vegan that she encountered at the Farmer's Market. This story illustrates a pattern

within my interviews of participants demonstrating to me that their motives are better aligned with their ideologies than others’.

Finally, I was able to see the importance of the VOM of authenticity in the pattern that participants were more concerned with how well people live out their espoused commitments than they were with the particular *content* of those commitments. They tended to judge those who expressed their own beliefs but did not (by their measure) live out these commitments more harshly than they did those who did not express their same beliefs. As Christine sums up, referring to the people in the stories she recounts above, “So those are the people I have a problem with. Because it's fine if you don't know and you don't care. But don't pose. Don't act like you do care, you know?” This sort of an attitude – that someone who does not, in word or in deed, seek to live out values at all is actually less worthy of critique than someone who is taking a few steps in the right direction – reveals the centrality of authenticity in the way participants understood others’ actions. The alignment of practice and belief was so important that the expression of a belief, absent the appropriate practices, was actually more of a “sin” than not holding that belief at all.

### *Intentionality: The Examined Life*

An underlying but additional current to participants’ explanation of their lives as meaningful and authentic was a vocabulary of intentionality – an effort to explain every action as a deliberate and purposive *decision*. In interpretations of their own and others’ actions, participants felt that everything in life was and should be accountable; that is, there should be a reason or account behind every action. After Randy includes the idea of “minimizing harm” in his definition of homesteading, I ask him to tell me more about what he means by that. He says,

And for me a big aspect of that is being as ethical to other people as you possibly can. And actually examine the aspects of everything that you're doing,



and everything you're consuming, and seeing like how it impacts people – not only locally, not only in your own family, but how it impacts the entire planet.

The belief was widespread within my interviews that life should be examined, carefully constructed in the context of one's understanding of social institutions, patterns, and problems.

Various interviewees discussed the importance of their educational experiences – particularly in higher education – as teaching them that the way to address social problems was through being deliberate in their individual actions. First, several discussed college as the space in which they learned about the social problems about which they were concerned. As Kylah tells me,

Kylah: In college, you know, making friends with these really intelligent kids who had grown up in the city and they were, they were really motivated and [activism] was something they did. And I think it was really inspiring to me. I studied, you know, I studied photojournalism and anthropology and so I was really, it was the first time that I ever saw things as being systematic. That I ever – even like issues that I realized that, you know, that there were these social ills that were ingrained in our system of existence. And that were like forms of oppression that were systematic that were keeping people down.

Similar to various other interviews, Kylah describes both the classroom and the people she met during college as teaching her that deep-rooted social problems surrounded her. Participants described college as not only educating them on problems, but also the solution to those problems – the idea that such problems would be addressed through an accumulation of individual decisions that would somehow “trickle up.” For example, Mary tells me,

I took my first environmental studies class ... And, it made the world seem really big and really small all at the same time. Like, there's so much going on [pause], but it's also like every, all of your actions affect the bigger picture... the idiom of, "Think globally, act locally." ... everything is so interconnected, and you may not even be aware that, you know, what you do right now will affect your neighbor. Or it will affect someone somewhere else... everything is so interconnected that it trickles on to the bigger picture.

Both Mary and Kylah share how college was a worldview-changing experience for them, teaching them they were embedded in problematic social systems and that they needed to

respond to these social ills. These experiences taught them to frame their actions as individual choices in response to widespread social or environmental problems, socializing them to frame their motives as conscientious.

Participants felt the need to be able to provide a reason for every aspect of their life, and explained all actions as a consciously deliberated decision – not matter how minute. For example, several participants described to me their struggle for intentionality in the way that they ate; every single bite needed to be considered from several different vantage points, every brand and grocery store and type of food had to be chosen based on larger principles rather than personal taste. Lynn, for instance, revealed to me her inner dialogue around food: “And so one of the factors that we began then considering - in addition to how was the animal raised - was what was it fed, was how far did this travel?” The idea that one must consider the environmental, ethical, and personal health implications of every bite shows the extent to which people felt the need to live consciously and purposely.

Participants evaluated others’ motives against the criteria of intentionality as well, sometimes resulting in frustration when others made what were perceived to be unintentional choices. For example, Tracy – who recently started homesteading full time and estimates she grows 20% of her family’s food – tells me about her frustration with her husband when he bought orange juice in a plastic container rather than cardboard carton.

[My husband] bought – you know, I asked him to get some orange juice and he, and I had been buying it in cartons because I was thinking cartons [were] a little bit more biodegradable than the plastic. And, we’re not, I just saw an article that we’re not recycling plastic in the US, we’re recycling in China, so it’s all complicated. And he bought the orange juice in a big plastic, and I was like “Really? What were you thinking?” [Laughs.] ... It’s something I mean to bring up [with my husband later in a conversation.] Like, what are we thinking right now about plastic and how much plastic we’re gonna consume and do we even want to be buying juice if we can only get it in a plastic [container]?

The frustration that Tracy feels with her husband, and her desire to have a future discussion with him to examine their values and practices around consumption of plastic, reveal the way that participants feel that intentionality should extend to every single action of life. Participants were exhaustive and meticulous in their efforts to explain their actions as deliberate.

I also saw the value placed on intentionality by participants' efforts to hedge the threat of the critique that they were *unintentional* in their practices. In several of my conversations, participants underwent work to justify those actions they thought others may perceive to be unexamined. They took pains to explain how practices that at first glance appeared unexamined or thoughtless were actually deliberate, intentional compromises chosen for other motives or goals. For example, Leah – a young woman who lives on communal land in a “structure” she built herself – talks me through her process of having to compromise some of her idealistic ideals to lead a more typical, and convenient, life. She explains why she gave in to getting her first computer and cell phone, and why she would like to get electricity and hot water for the self-made “structure” she lives in, which she built on communally owned land on which others built their own homes as well.

It's been an interesting kind of journey for me of like, um, being in a place, being in a really idealistic place of not wanting to make any kind of footprint kind of. And at some point realizing that I was kind of like almost like strangling myself with those ideals ... So those [changes referenced in the paragraph above] are all kind of things, that you know, maybe would look to someone like I'm like moving away from my ideals or something.

Here, Leah similarly shows her sense that others are judging these conventional decisions as being unaligned to her larger ideals, and so not intentionally chosen in the context of her beliefs. She responds to this critique with her assertion that her ideals were “strangling” her, indirectly claiming that her recent changes were chosen to restore her mental health. In this, Leah restores her lifestyle as deliberate, even if first glance would suggest this to be an unthoughtful choice.

Many took the approach of providing disclaimers for their actions that they were neither perfect, nor trying to be – and in so doing hedge against the possibility of critique for not aligning all of their actions to their ideals. For example, after Emily tells me about how horrible fast food is because it is and unsafe and fast food companies don't raise their meat ethically -"I mean I don't eat McDonald's anymore, I don't, you know go to fast food restaurants" - She then backtracks, saying "Um, but at the same time I still eat an angus burger at [a local burger joint] so, like [Laughs] you know [I'm not] ... on a high horse." In this exchange, Emily makes clear that she's not claiming to follow this principle perfectly, and so cannot be critiqued for falling short of it. In a very similar way, in the following Randy admits to his own failings, his own "wrong" choices, while simultaneously justifying his ostensibly unintentional choices.

I, and there is a trade-off there. Because I mean, I love my electronics. But at the same time I do have to recognize that, yeah, there's a lot of lithium pollution in the world. And there's no telling whether mining all these rare earth metals come to actually produce them. But at the same time I can't really live sustainably without internet access, because I need that information available. And that's really the cheapest and easiest way for me to get it. So I mean, you know, you have to really kinda ... you have to really make those decisions yourself, for yourself.

Here, in one fell swoop Randy admits his wrong-doings, justifies them, and then indirectly asserts that everyone has to make compromises.

In many cases, these efforts to distance oneself from judgements of imperfection showed up as a more direct critique of extremists and purists as being disconnected from reality. Christine was an excellent example of this, telling me often throughout the interview that she's a "realist." After describing how graduate school has taken much of her time, she admits that that night she would have to take her kids to Subway. She says, "So as much as I believe in feeding my family, I am also a realist." She then critiques those who are "extreme" in the sense that they never compromise their moral code, telling me,

My problem with a lot of the movement is you get a lot of people who are really extreme. And there's just no room for it. I just – it can inform, but you have to live in the real world. I'm thinking particularly of a woman I know in Maryland who --we're not friends anymore just 'cause she's so over the top I just can't handle it, she's so militant ... She was telling me this story of sitting in her car out front of a restaurant and all she wanted to do was have lunch with her friends. But she was sitting there sobbing because she'd forgotten her thermos full of well water from home. And she wouldn't drink the water at the restaurant. And I was like "You are flippin' insane."

This sort of a critique showed up often, discounting “purists,” and in so doing critiquing the goal of efforts to be entirely intentional. In doing so, participants buffer against the critique that they fell short of this goal, indirectly revealing the importance they place on intentionality.

Lastly, I see the value participants placed on intentionally in the weight they placed on being “aware,” implicitly claiming that simply knowing why you do what you do (or even knowing why you should be doing something that you aren't) was a highly desirable trait. Participants perceived themselves to be more “informed” than abstract others and tended to identify as intellectuals, often offering to me their education and degrees as first responses to my opening question of “Tell me about yourself.” They often considered the general public as “uninformed” and stressed to me the importance of people “educating” themselves and gaining “awareness.” The language of gaining awareness consistently arose in discussions around how to affect social change and address the issues about which they were concerned. In these discussions, participants revealed their assumption that social change was created through individuals gaining awareness of social issues and deliberately changing their individual practices accordingly.

### Altruism

In this more specific vocabulary of motive, people explained their actions as altruistic, accounting for their daily lives as efforts to contribute to the good of the world, bearing in mind the consequences of their actions on others. People who drew heavily on this vocabulary of

motive described themselves as service-oriented and used phrases to explain their behavior like wanting to “make a difference,” “make the world a better place,” or “help my community.” For example, Keith tells me when I ask him if he and his wife Kristin consider themselves to be “political” that “much of their lives” has been “motivated by a desire to enhance not just our own personal well-being but that of others” in “pursuit of the common good.” This was such a taken-for-granted and foundational part of their vocabularies of motive that it often went unexplained and unexamined, as if it were obvious to themselves and to me. For example, when I ask Mary, what she had wanted to do with her Environmental Studies degree when she decided on this as a major, she says,

Mary: Hmmm [pause]. [Says the following breathily and high-pitched, as if she's poking fun at herself.] I have no idea, save the world of course! [We both laugh.]

Mary's “of course” reveals the extent to which she was entrenched in a culture that assumes that actions should be other-oriented and intended to contribute positively to “the world.”

Similar to other vocabularies of motive, one way in which this espoused VOM surfaced was in *explanations* of a life change, as compared to the discussion of how that life change came to be. Take, for example, Christine's decision to quit her high-paying pharmaceuticals job.

And it's kind of like dating – you have to figure out what you don't want to figure out what you do. [Jordan laughs]. So, I made friends with my prostitute archetype. And I really kind of figured out, “Wow I really feel dirty.” You know? Selling these medications that people that can't afford and spending all this money on lavish dinners and lunches and stuff like that. So, I got out, started working for myself in marketing.

Later in the interview, she justifies to me why she stayed in the job for a couple of years in the first place, explaining,

And so for the first year and a half I worked in pharmaceuticals, I was helping people. I was selling anti-depressants, I was selling herpes medications, I was really good at what I did and I was helping people.

Christine thus paints this decision to be one of leaving behind a job that she entered because she initially found it meaningful, but ultimately decided that it didn't align with her values. In this account, she reveals her chosen vocabulary of motive – that her career decisions are motivated by altruism, by wanting to “help” people.

Yet, over the course of the interview the factors contributing to this choice to leave her pharmaceuticals job get much more complex. She tells me the “industry shifted” and that she was no longer “empowered over [her] own district” and was instead under the jurisdiction and authority of MBAs, and “instead of me determining how to manage my own business and my territory, it became somebody four states away.” In addition to this frustration over her loss of autonomy, she tells me some stories about how she felt like she was sexually harassed because the company encouraged her to be “eye candy.” Then, she tells me of an encounter with a doctor where she tells him that she doesn't really think the drugs will help his patients and that she “believe[s] in taking responsibility for my body and my health” and uses “homeopathy.” In addition, she tells me she didn't “enjoy it anymore.” So, overall, there were several reasons she left - sexual harassment, loss of autonomy, not buying into the purpose of the work, and not enjoying it. Yet out of all of these possible reasons that she could have chosen to give as her primary account, Christine explains this decision to me as leaving because she was no longer “helping people” and “felt dirty.”

Another way in which I was able to see the importance placed on the vocabulary of altruism was the way in which people felt the need to justify why they were not involved in pursuits that they perceived as altruistic. For example, when I ask Emily if she had ever been involved in activism, she tells me,

I'm *sad* to say that I'm not. I'm not. Um, it's, it's maybe because I've been, um, I've been shy. Um, or maybe like [coughs] --excuse me – um, it's just that like

I've been like in the library the whole time, you know what I mean? Like [Both laugh] Um, *it's not that I'm unwilling to*. It's just simply, um, I mean I just I've been in school... *in very small ways I've been involved*, um, just this past semester. Um, but for the most part, no, I've not been like part of any organization or, um, anything that's *done something really cool like that*. (Mmhmm.)

Jordan: You said --the phrase you used was that you're sad to say that you're not? (Yeah.) Does that mean that's something that you like would do?

Emily: Yeah I think, I mean *given the time!* [Both laugh] Given the -- if this dissertation wasn't such a like looming specter --um, yeah. It's something that magically if I, um, if things slowed down, um, in my own life, in my own research, um, that I would definitely do. I think that's where I would go next.

In the “ums” and hesitations, the apparent shame she feels for not being involved in activism, and the desire she feels to be able to tell me would be willing to be involved in activism, Emily reveals some guilt for not being involved in activism. This conversation shows the cultures in which she is embedded, in which activism – fighting the good fight, engaging in social problems – is taken for granted as good.

Finally, I see the value placed on altruistic VOMs through the way people seek to downplay, or feel guilt around, perceived self-centered motives. For example, when Thomas and I discuss homesteading, he tells me,

Thomas: Um, you know, I could also share, especially since this is private, this is not like it's... To be as honest as I can be I think that I would say, I would, you know, some of it is selfish. I want to be in on something and like get in on it early for my own benefit. Or, you know, I don't, I think it's probably too harsh to say just so I can feel like I did something good in my life, but to do something good, good with my life. I'm trying to get in on the ground level I guess.

Jordan: And is that the biggest individual benefit, I guess, that you see?

Thomas: Yeah. Yeah, I mean I think also just personal fulfillment. I just feel like it's a really - it's, personal benefit like I, I can also be like active and fit. And I like those things, and I like - I think that's part of like living a healthy, balanced life. Um, so. Um. Those benefits too. And that's very fulfilling, and it's very, um, gratifying. Like it's a really good way to be connected, just connected period. Whether it's connected to people or connected to the earth, or, you know. It's a good place to be, a good thing to do. So I'd say those would be



the benefits, too. Probably just, just as important is wanting to just do something good with my life for myself (yeah).

In this exchange, I see that Thomas seems to feel some shame, embarrassment, or reluctance to admit that part of the reason he wants to participate in homesteading is for his own benefit. This hesitation to explain ones' motives in terms of self-benefit reveals the desire to explain motives as other-oriented and altruistic.

Here, it is worth noting that these participants saw themselves as community-oriented in that they sought *contribute* to the community, but in large they did not want to *depend* on a community. In other words, they did not want to be a part of an interdependent ecosystem; they wanted to be able to be independent and self-sufficient, but to give back to the community through offering their skills or ideas to others. In this, there exists a tension between altruistic vocabularies of motive, and the vocabularies of motive of independence that I discuss below. For example, when I ask Blake to tell me about himself, he begins by launching into a discussion of how bad the decline of "self-reliance" is for the world.

... it's kind of crazy how our world has gone so far on the other end of self-reliance. We live in a world that's so interconnected to each other and so interdependent upon one another that we, most of us, wouldn't be able to survive on the land that we live on. ... To kind of regain a solid footing as homosapiens on the planet, we have to like start to-- maybe not scale back but we have to kind of step back a little bit and regain some familiarity with the things around us ...

And so I'm just motivated to live my life that way and hopefully I can inspire other people to kind of be a little bit more gentle on the Earth as they walk their journey through it and that kind of thing.

In this discussion, Blake explains that he seeks to live a life that both tries to achieve self-reliance, but that is also an effort to engage others to do the same. In this, he manages to frame his motives as both an effort for independence and an altruistic, community-oriented effort. This tension between wanting to contribute to, but not depend on, larger communities was also

evidenced in the way the Lem discussed his efforts to find a church home. He tells me he tried to find a church that recognized that,

... the body of Christ is supposed to be a witness of peace in the world. And that on one end of the structure the old order Amish and Mennonites believed so strongly that they needed to have integrity as a body and set themselves apart from the world. And that agriculture facilitated a way to do that because they could be self-sufficient. And so then they wouldn't become dependent upon the world and have, and fear that they might slip and fall sort of prey to some of the world's way of doing things. So I wasn't –

Jordan: Do you feel that way also? That agriculture is a way to reduce your dependence on the world?

Lem: I would, yeah I mean, so that was sort of compelling to me to an extent. But then I also sort of felt like it was kind of a xenophobic sort of culture that they would create that wasn't very hospitable to outsiders and that is not what I understood the church to be. So I was trying to sort of balance those two things.

In this discussion, Lem reveals his discomfort with the idea of self-sufficiency because it doesn't seem "hospitable." It doesn't seem like an altruistic, community-oriented endeavor to be self-sufficient, and yet he likes the idea of not participating in mainstream culture or being dependent on the world. This pattern arose repeatedly in interviews. Participants explained their motives as ways to achieve both self-sufficiency *and* to impact the world, and sought to negotiate that tension.

### *Conclusion: Strains to Vocabularies of Conscientiousness*

These vocabularies of motive, so central to participants' sense of self, are difficult to draw from when one feels enmeshed in unethical systems. If, for example, one is aware of the problems with the food system but continues to eat food produced in that system, this part of life can no longer be explained as intentional or altruistic. When one feels that American culture is materialistic and shallow, following cultural conventions of work and success inhibits one's ability to explain themselves as living a meaningful, authentic life. If one wants to "save the world," but doesn't believe the world can be saved and so isn't engaged in the community or

politics, it is difficult to frame one's actions as altruistic. In short, pessimism and inefficacy don't align with the way that participants' make meaning of their actions and explain themselves to others. To acknowledge these emotions and perceptions would contradict their identities, explaining why tensions and inconsistencies around these issues were so prevalent in interviews.

When one comes to be aware that they participate in problematic, unethical systems and thus are unable to explain themselves as conscientious, doing nothing is not an option.

Conscientious people feel compelled to respond to perceived social problems. Yet, if one feels disheartened about the possibility of affecting change, they have to determine how to frame and understand their actions as responses to systematic issues without participating in the efforts to create institutional change that they perceive to be futile. I argue in chapter four that homesteading meets this need, enabling participants to cast their actions as meaningful, intentional, and altruistic – and still continue to believe that systems are beyond repair.

### ***Vocabularies of Independence***

In the second of these vocabularies of motive, participants used motives of independence. In this set of vocabularies, interviewees are socialized to believe that “the personal” and “the political” are fundamentally at odds. That is, personal decisions should be unconstrained by and unaided by larger social environments and systems – as opposed to the idea that personal decisions must be made in reference to, and contribute to, larger social realities as is the case in vocabularies of conscientiousness. The specific versions of this vocabulary used most often were autonomy, non-conformity, and self-determinism, all of which constituted different ways to frame actions individualistically, self-reliant, and free from influence.

Interestingly, many people held and used both of these vocabularies – they told me in various ways that they wanted total control over the direction of their lives and to live lives based

on (freely chosen) larger principles. These vocabularies of independence are threatened when resignation and inefficacy foster a sense that participants are no longer in control of their own lives, as systems hold too much sway over their life decisions – including systems of meaning, such as the expectations of “mainstream” culture. The following section will show how people drew on vocabularies of independence, and explain how pessimism and inefficacy contradict such explanations.

### *Self-Reliance and Autonomy*

Participants often accounted for their actions as efforts to achieve autonomy and self-sufficiency. They told me in a range of ways that they wanted to be able to take care of themselves and control their own lives and environments; dependence of all forms was something to be avoided at all costs. I had innumerable discussions around the perception that people should be able to live their lives in whatever ways they see fit – “I believe in, you know, self-destiny or that people should be given the opportunity to live their life the way they want for the most part” (Nathan) – and the general belief that individual wills should supersede the tyranny of the majority, or decisions of the powerful. This value of individualism was also expressed in how people explained the course of their lives, which were framed as deliberate actions to reduce the influence of systems.

Several participants discussed their families or parents as important institutions that socialized them into the importance of independence and autonomy. For example, notice the way Isaac describes his parents when I ask him to tell me about himself.

So both of my parents when I was younger were somewhat anti-government and anti-establishment, all together. And my Dad is still that way, where he’s anti-establishment. So the church is not something that he likes very much, that, that type of thing. Um, and I would say that I retain a little bit of that.

Similarly, Mike explains that his parents taught him that dependence was something to be avoided at all costs.

So I, we – my sister and I – grew up having it beat into us, you know, how far a dollar could go. Had it really beat into us that under no circumstances will you ever accept government assistance. And I found out later on that, based on what Dad was making as a carpenter they were eligible for all kinds of what we refer to as entitlements today. And it was just a point of pride that he never pursued any of that.

Mike's wife, Angie, echoes his sentiments, telling me that her mother also "refused to accept" any assistance even when "there were years when [they] had nothing for Christmas." In numerous small references such as these, people discussed the influences of their families in instilling the value of independence.

Accordingly, several participants told me that they sought to disentangle themselves from overly conformist and controlling systems. For example, they told me they were disgruntled with HOAs and enjoyed living on land in part because they felt they had more autonomy in the country. Rick, for instance, explained his decision to build an "off grid" house – one that is independent from public utilities and "grids" such as electricity or water – as an attempt to free himself from the need to comply with the housing code so that he could build a straw-bale house. He tells me,

I was gonna do it the way I wanted to do it. I didn't care, I wanted to build it like my dream. I wanted it to be just what I wanted, I didn't want some inspector telling me, you can't do that or you've got to do it like this or whatever. And the only way I could get away with that was to no need their power. That's how they control you. With power.

In Rick's eyes, the grid controls individual actions, and to do what you want you have to disconnect. Similarly, David explains to me his frustration with living under an HOA.

I'm saying, like when you want to do something with your property you shouldn't be restricted based on some criteria set by your neighbors. That's socialism. When a group of people say you can't do this because we all decided – No, that's not freedom! That's just a bunch of people taking away your rights.

That's why I like libertarianism. I'm all for property rights, I'm all for gay rights. Because we don't have a right as a people to take away the rights for - of, you know, rights of others because we're all a collective.

David desired to escape from the tyranny of the "collective" by living outside of the purview of an HOA, and in so doing expresses a more general perspective that individual rights supersede democratically chosen rules and guidelines.

One area in which this distrust of institutions played out, as well as the aspiration to live outside the scope of institutional control, was in the strong pattern that many participants homeschooled their children. Isaac homeschools his eight children to avoid the "dumbing down of the system" that he believes is all about "getting people to conform and, and follow in step with the system --the machine, if you will." Mary intends to homeschool her children when she has them because she "likes the idea of caring for them yourself." Some participants, such as Randy and Debbie, felt that the schools did not adequately accommodate the unique individual needs of their children; Debbie tells me that her children have "anxiety sometimes" and tells me that "it just worked better for [my children] to do school as individuals ... to customize their education for them." Dean and Lindsey, as well as Julia, are even critical of traditional homeschooling, telling me this tries to replicate the education system and that they instead "unschool" their children where they "learn from doing and exploring" (Dean and Lindsey) or participate in "child-led learning" (Julia). Of those who did send their children to schools outside the home, some sought "alternative" schools such as the one Tracy describes to me, which still seek to inculcate the values of independence and free-thinking:

... students were expected to show more independence and more maturity, and they were given more freedom. And they were expected to, through learning how to deal with freedom by, by being given more freedom. ...

This prevalence of homeschooling – a system in which only approximately 3% of the children in the US belong, according to the National Center for Education Statistics<sup>8</sup> – and efforts to seek out alternative education, as well as the way in which people *explained* these decisions, reveals the extent to which participants valued independence.

This emphasis on individualism and autonomy was not just a broader worldview, but the accounts they used to describe their decisions and actions. This extended to employment – several tell me they prefer to work for themselves, or decided not to work outside the home, to escape the “business politics” in the workplace (e.g. Hannah, Xander). As a last example, this sort of explanation encompassed efforts to disengage from the conventional economy – David tells me he “puts [his] money into gold and silver because he doesn’t trust social security or his military pension, telling me “I don’t believe it. So I put it away for myself. If you want to do something right, do it yourself.” In sum, participants generally valued self-reliance and accounted for their actions as efforts to achieve autonomy.

### *Independence as Non-Conformity*

In this section, I will analyze how people explain themselves and their actions as expressing their unique characteristics – particularly their differences from the “mainstream.” Julia sums up this vocabulary of motive neatly in the way she explains her decision to homeschool her children. When she tells me that this was initially a “scary” thing to do, I ask her what was scary about it, and she replies,

Defying convention, absolutely. Going against what's expected by society and choosing to do that with a child. Because it's one thing to do that on your own, and you're, I don't know, a teenager and you want to pierce your nose and try something rebellious. But rebelling in the name of your kid is a whole different thing. I might have been a little bit set up for it because I studied as a home birth lay midwife. And so I have a background of thinking outside the box ...

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<sup>8</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>

And I think we're really heavily indoctrinated to behave that way in society, that way being like any way other than what most people are doing.

Similar to the way that Julia casts her decision to homeschool, many participants explained their lives as rooted in their ability to think for themselves, live outside of conventions, and do the unexpected. Some traced this ability to think outside the box as being a value instilled in them by their families – for example, Julia told me, “My mother is an artistic person and a freethinking person,” and Blake tells me that his mother was a “free thinking ... she’s not scared to go outside of the status quo. She's not scared to push her limits and try something new.”

This vocabulary manifests in their identities as mavericks, independents, and free thinkers; several people tell me they can’t be classified, hesitating to align themselves with any group or label. For example, almost every participant identified as a political Independent, and some were reluctant to even call themselves that – as Nathan tells me, “I avoid pretty much all labels now.” As another example, participants identified as spiritual but not religiously affiliated, again showing a rejection of institutions and labels. Neal, who had in the interview mentioned labels such as urban homesteading, prepping, and libertarianism, balked when I asked him what he would “call” himself or his lifestyle. Shaking his head, he says softly “So many labels, so many labels” and then elaborates,

I can’t even begin to, to tell you what I am. Because it’s this, it’s this mish mosh of so many different ideologies. Coupled with life experience.

Like Neal, many participants felt that they were too unique to be labeled, insisting that they were free thinkers rather than fitting neatly into any category. As Isaac tells me, “I would just say I’m ultra outside-of-everything.” If participants did adopt labels or descriptively categorize themselves, they used terms to signal their “alternative” status, distancing themselves from the abstract mainstream. Participants described themselves as hipsters, hippies, unconventional,



alternative, contrarians, weird, or untraditional. These perceptions were sometimes expressed in images, if not labels. Notice the way that Bob and Todd describe themselves:

[Describing his friend's reaction to his decision to run for office.] And all my political friends were like 'Yeah!' You know, Bob with the bushy beard, ponytail, doesn't own any nice clothes, drives a dirty old pick-up truck, always wears blue jeans, probably with holes in them, you know? Leather glove stuck in his back pocket. (Bob)

[Describing his past work in carpentry.] And we were kind of like the hipster carpentry crew. I mean we were like you know, had like side burns, you know, long side burns and cut off t shirts. I don't know we kind of looked like a little different (Todd).

These images visually express their understanding of themselves as unorthodox and rebellious.

Extending from these identities as non-conformists, participants thought of themselves as free-thinkers and several accordingly downplay the influence of any institution or group on their own thinking; they tell me they formed their opinions of their own accord, rather than being taught their commitments or concerns by others. Evan succinctly describes to me the significance he placed on independent thinking, telling me that during college he would have described himself as a "crunchy, smart hippie" and that he was "into" the "transcendentalist poets and writers."

Thoreau – I buy that stuff whole cloth – Thoreau's concepts of self-reliance... being independently minded and thinking for yourself ... I love thinking for myself. I love the burden of it.

Similarly, Dean and Lindsey tell me they homeschool their children to enable them to have "free thought." This commitment to "free thinking" plays out in the ways people describe themselves, telling me that they are different because they critically examine their lives and don't just follow the crowd. Leah, who grew up in an intentional community, tells me about how she is ever-questioning and critical, and never simply follows the norm.

I always knew that like other realities are like possible [because I grew up on an intentional community] ... just knowing that I can, I can live and create

whatever I want kind of a thing. Like I don't need to do things just because they're culturally normal ... I mean in the sense that like, of like being inspired to live in a different way. Questioning things, critical thinking... I don't need to just like be a consumer or be educated in a certain way. Or do things the norm because that's what people want me to do.

Several participants described themselves, and their decisions, in this same fashion – the result of their ability to forge their own non-conformist paths.

Interestingly, several interviewees spontaneously bring up that they gather information from less “mainstream” sources, and distanced themselves from people who do read such mainstream sources; in so doing, they situate themselves as free thinkers, intelligent enough to create their own stances rather than repeating the sanctioned stances of the majority. As Isaac explains mainstream media, “Most of the news stations are owned by a few, very central companies. So there’s a lot of manipulation within the media.” Rather than discussing more mainline newspapers as sources of information, many interviewees tell me that they visit websites which consist of hundreds of links to independent news sources from all over the world – sites that leave it up to the individual to sift through a torrent of information and decide what is legitimate and worthy of concern. When discussing these sites, participant took care to point out that they were intelligent enough to find the good information within such sites, and distance themselves from the gullible crazies that bought into the conspiracy theories of the fringe. When Nathan, for example, mentions that he’s “always been attracted to opinions outside the mainstream,” his wife Michelle responds that she “can’t quite read” the stuff he does because she doesn’t believe in “conspiracy theories.”

Nathan: You think I read stuff like that?

Michelle: I don't know. Eh I think some of the blogs you read--

Nathan: Well I usually try to ignore conspiracy theories and stuff too.

Michelle: I mean I think you just do a better job of ignoring it. You're willing to like go through it and be like "Oh that seems a little too crazy for me." So you know? [They laugh.] Right? Whereas I'm just like I'm not gonna read the crazy people!

In this exchange, the couple works to preserve Nathan's status as a reasonable but independent thinker by showing that he does not fully participate in the "conspiracy" culture of such sites, but is intelligent enough to separate fact from fiction.

The way in which participants articulated their actions as nonconformist was often expressed in their defenses and justification of actions that they understood to be perceived to be mainstream. For example, Rick degrades what he calls the "hybrid type guy" – those who invest in solar power or organic agriculture, but "make their money in the conventional business realm." Comparing himself to the hybrid guys, Rick tells me that he lives on more of the "lunatic fringe." Rick then pauses and switches gears, seeing himself through the eyes of those to the left of him, telling me,

See compared to these young people that are sort of hippies that are back to the – I'm like business man compared to them. Ok? They look at me and they, some of them don't like me because they, they probably see me as a sell out to the man or something, you know? ... Because I am a business man. Like I had a real estate company and I was converting a trailer park in [a local town] into a cutting edge solar community. And that trailer park was gonna have to go away. So, you know I had to get in front of the town and I had to rationalize why it was in the best interest of everyone involved for the lowest, most affordable housing to disappear. I was charging only \$400 a month rent... It was the lowest rent anywhere in [town.]. And it was this decrepit old trailer park and I wanted it to go away and be replaced with ... a completely energy independent solar community that would be built around a garden ok? In trying to enact that vision of, like, trying to reorganize the way we live at a higher level at a more kind of affluent price tag I alienated some sort of anarchistic types that felt like "Who the fuck – Man, why are you getting rid of the trailer park? Where are those people gonna go? You're an asshole, you're a greedy guy. ...So anytime that you step up and you try to make some kind of change in a big way, you're gonna alienate some people. And it's funny, but actually my biggest critics tend to be people on the left of me.

In this discussion, Rick defends himself against this seemingly conventional action – to pursue profit and cater to a more affluent population at the expense of the poor – explaining that in

actuality his efforts were more radical and forward-thinking than his critics. Rick reframed his motives as countercultural, despite their seeming orthodoxy.

Similarly, note the way that Christine reframed her motives in buying a luxury vehicle, something that she sees as undermining her status as a person who is critical of conventions and mainstream institutions.

Yes, [my husband] makes great money. We both drive luxury vehicles. We both bought them used and I drive a luxury SUV because I can throw a trailer on it and it makes more sense because with three kids and friends - a pick-up truck with an extended cab still isn't enough room. So I chose what works for me and it just happened to be a luxury car – if I could find an American version I liked, I would.

Christine felt the need to account for what could be understood as a materialistic decision, recasting it as necessary for an active homesteading life and careful to note that she purchased it used, and in so doing reinstituting it as a part of her alternative lifestyle. As a last example, notice the way Bob – who gardens and raises chickens in town – frames the course of his life in the following response to the simple prompt “Tell me about yourself.”

I'm not your usual suspect. In my twenties, I was a very successful college dropout and traveler and ended up in [North Carolina]. ... But, so in my mid-twenties I was like "Ok Bob, maybe you need to go back to school, pick a career, focus on something." And decided that was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to get paid for my hobbies. Which at the time were gardening, politics and writing. And so within a few years I was writing freelance for the [a local newspaper]. I finished my degree in horticulture and started a gardening business. And, cut off my ponytail and borrowed a suit and ran for city council and got elected to city council. So that's been 22 years without a day job.

In one fell swoop, Bob tells me that he is unconventional – “I’m not your usual suspect” who had to “cut off [his] ponytail” to enter politics; defends the unconventional aspects of his pathway as positive and intentional, mentioning that he was not just a college drop-out but a “successful” one that intentionally chose not to go to college; and implicitly critiques norms of work – he

instead wants to get “paid for his hobbies.” In all of these examples, participants framed and re-framed their decisions and actions as countercultural.

### Self-Determination

Lastly, participants used the language of self-determination to explain their behavior, offering individualistic narratives that implicitly or explicitly denied the influence of external factors on the course of one's life. Participants tended to account for the outcomes of their lives as products of their own making, unaided and unconstrained by external influences. This emphasis on personal decision-making is an expression of participants' understanding of themselves as independent agents in control of their own lives.

This language of self-determination was most evident in those who described experiencing apparently life altering events, and yet in their explanations of their lives denied or minimized the influence of such events. Blake, for example, tells me that he believes that something needs to “shock” people into realizing that some sort of systemic disaster is coming, I respond by asking him if he had experienced such a shock and he responds:

Blake: Um [pause].

Jordan: Was there a turning point?

Blake: [Pause] I don't know. I've always been self-motivated, so, and I have always been passionate about self-reliance and just learning about survival skills and being able to like live on my own. I love the thought of living out, more like a Native American did a thousand years ago. Um, so there was no real turning point for me. Um, there was – I mean I definitely – I mean in terms of me initiating this homestead – I never, I lived out in California for 6 years after I graduated from [college], guiding rock climbing trips and ultimately spending most of my time building homes and cabinetry for people to make money. And I ended up, I ended up, uh, when I was 26 buying a \$300,000 property ...

Blake tells me that he bought a \$300,000 home with the intention of “flipping it,” when the recession hit. He was suddenly upside down on his house and in the middle of remodeling it; after spending years finishing the remodel in order to sell it at a loss, he moved back into his

parents' house and started saving up money to purchase land. Despite the weight of this event in prompting him to move home and preceding his homesteading ventures, and the apparent influence of this life event in his perspective that systems are too interconnected and vulnerable, Blake downplays this influence. He responds to my question by telling me there was "no real turning point" - that he has "always" been passionate about the lifestyle. In this framing, Blake attributes his life course to his personality and voluntary choices, situating it as within his control rather than giving credit to the whims of external forces.

Similarly, several participants described life transitions, decisions, and changes as arising solely from their voluntary choices, regardless of the factors beyond their control that played key roles in prompting these changes. Some of these stories I have mentioned earlier in this chapter. I discussed Christine's efforts to cast her decision to leave pharmaceuticals as coming from her own initiative to transition to more meaningful work, minimizing the role of the loss of her work autonomy and sexism. This principle also plays out in Rick's framing of his decision to leave the corporate world as an intentional "opting out" and minimizing his lack of success in this field. In addition to these stories, several other participants claim what seem to be constrained choices to be fully voluntary. Randy, for example, gives little credit to recurring unemployment in his family's decision to become goat farmers, mentioning the loss of his and his wife's jobs almost in passing without giving them credit in prompting any change in perspective or the course of their lives. Lastly Michelle and Nathan neglect to mention in a long conversation about their changing views on meritocracy and cynicism about the American Dream that Nathan had been laid off during the recession. In general, participants framed their lives as products of their own making.

### *Conclusion: Strains to Vocabularies of Independence*

When one comes to feel that their well-being and future are bound to precarious or overly controlling systems, the ability to understand and account for ones' actions as individually controlled is obstructed. To feel that the social security system is irrevocably self-imploding means that one is no longer in control of their retirement security. To feel that one's children are subjected to a conformist and regulatory school system means one is no longer in control of parenting and influencing kids' values and perceptions. To feel that some strong conflict is imminent on the political horizon means that one is no longer in control of their own security. Resignation and inefficacy directly undermine this vocabulary of motive.

Again, when one is unable to explain themselves as an independent person when that notion is so central to his/her self-concept and presentation, doing nothing is not an option. An independent person cannot be content with or complacent in remaining bound to overly powerful and conformist systems, feeling that their life is being influenced by forces beyond their control. Yet, if the system or institution itself cannot be fixed, the person is left to navigate how to understand and explain themselves as holding control over the direction of their lives when they also understand the social systems to which they are connected as beyond repair or even doomed to fail. I argue in chapter four that homesteading meets this need, giving participants stories and meanings they can use to understand their lives as independent from problematic systems while they simultaneously feel powerless in reducing the reach of such systems or increasing their stability or resilience.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter argued that participants' disavowal of pessimism and inefficacy revealed that these perspectives were problematic to participants, who understood themselves to be

neither negative nor resigned despite interviews that suggested otherwise. I argue that these perspectives were troublesome to participants because they undermine key aspects of their identities – specifically, their vocabularies of motive. Participants used the language of contentiousness and independence to make sense of their actions, decisions, and life course generally, suggesting these to be key frameworks through which they make sense of their identities to themselves and others. I contend that pessimism and inefficacy hinder participants' ability to draw on these vocabularies, producing an identity strain in which participants hold perspectives and emotions that they find difficult to incorporate into the way they articulate their sense of self.

I believe that this analysis of vocabularies of motive offers a theoretical contribution to the field of movements that better accounts for pre-movement socialization and identity than a narrower focus on identity as a label or group, or ideology as the presence of a specific attitude or political commitment. Vocabularies are an integral part of the way we articulate our identities (Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles 2015), and is a shared basis through which we communicate those identities to others, constituting these identities as shared. VOM reveal commonalities in participants' pre-existing identities, but are not acknowledged or recognized by participants as groups with which they identify (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Vocabularies of motive thus offer a unique middle space between personal and collective identity, in that they are neither that which makes us unique – as personal identities are typically understood to be (Owens et al. 2010) – nor group-based identities such as collective identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001). As shared properties of identity, they can thus be used to explain social processes, but in a new way than does collective identity. Vocabularies of motive are thus a key but largely unexplored aspect of identity that can yield fruitful new insights into movement participation.



More generally, theoretically this chapter reveals the ways in which socially constructed and learned personal identities play a role in movement participation, rather than collective identities. Despite calls for the re-insertion and re-examination of personal identity into the study of movement participation (Haenfler et al. 2012; Bennett 1998), personal identity is often understood as irrelevant or marginal to movement participation. Specifically, this argument contributes to our understanding of how pre-existing personal identities can matter for movement participation in the absence of a pre-existing collective identities. Scholars of movements generally argue that identities matter in collective action to the extent that they are translated into collective identities (Klandermans 2002), and more specifically when a sense of personal injustice translates into group-based injustice and collective efficacy (Van Zomeren et al. 2004, 2008; Simon et al. 1998; Kawakami & Dion 1995). This pathway to participation is a process through which emotions and perspectives are *amplified* by extending a personal identity into a collective identity. In contrast, in this study I show particular emotions and perspectives can *threaten* shared aspects of personal identities. As I will argue in chapter four, it is the adoption of the collective identity related to participation in the homesteading movement, and its associated ideological narratives, that serve to alleviate this personal identity strain.

In chapter four, I will extend this analysis to argue that ideological accounts of the homesteading lifestyle help to alleviate identity strains by giving participants the ability to draw on their vocabularies of motive, while remaining resigned and pessimistic about the future. In the next chapter, I will examine how ideological accounts of homesteading perform identity work for participants in that they help to ease the strain between negative outlooks and emotions and the vocabularies of motive which are central to their identities.

## CHAPTER 4: RESTORATION

John and Lynn are an older couple that retired to a rural area in North Carolina to run a “small family farm” on 28 acres. They produce around 80% of their own food, and sell some of their products – for example, eggs, stewing hens, vegetables, figs, and grapes - at the Farmer's Market and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) venture in which participants purchase shares of small farmer's produce. John and Lynn draw heavily on conscientious vocabularies of motive, seeing and explaining themselves as other-oriented, altruistic people that seek to live a life in accordance with their Quaker values. They explain their decision to adopt homesteading as an extension of these religious values. John, during morning meditations, came to believe he was called to follow Jesus' biblical appeal to "feed my sheep" – during his career as an architect, John believed that he worked for the top “5%”, but wanted during retirement to live a life in service to the “other 95%.” Lynn describes homesteading as way to follow in the Quaker founder's call to "live in the life and power that takes away the occasion for war." In this decision, and the way they explained their lives in general, their decisions were deliberately chosen to be ideologically consistent with their Quaker values.

Like many of my interviewees, they use the logic and language of “opting out” to explain their homesteading, telling me that they became interested in the late 1960s in "what people call homesteading now" as an effort to "get away from" the "craziness" of the Vietnam War.

John: We are, we're part of that – we're trying to remember the phrase now that Timothy Leary used – “tune in, turn out, burn u...” whatever.

Lynn: Drop out? ... “Tune in, turn off, drop out.” We think that's what it is.

Throughout the interview, John and Lynn frame their homesteading as an effort to “drop out” of the systems with which they morally disagree, reducing their compliance with and contributions to unethical and harmful systems. As John succinctly explains, “We try to be self-sufficient because we don’t want to be a part of what’s going on.” One concrete way that John and Lynn seek to pull away from “what’s going on” is to reduce their use of fossil fuel. As Lynn tells me, “a piece of this whole journey was – and I think you actually said when we invaded Iraq, John said ‘If we’re gonna go to war over oil then I’m not gonna use it anymore.’” John and Lynn seek to wipe their hands free of oil, tainted with war and a host of environmental problems, by building a solar house, driving hybrid cars, and growing their own food so they don’t need to buy “the produce that comes from Brazil or California or China that takes fossil fuel.”

During the interview, John and Lynn express two main concerns. First, they have several critiques of and worries about the food system, to the point that they believe we are probably not far from a “catastrophe” in food; second, as Quakers they are highly opposed to violence and war. Yet, they see little evidence that these crises are likely to change. Specifically, they have little faith in the political process or activism to address either problem. As Lynn tells me,

I think [politicians] are really out of touch with the general population ... I thought when Obama was elected that there might be a chance for some shift. And it seems like he's been sucked into that culture instead of pulling the culture in a different way. And I, that's been very disappointing to me. There was a lot of movement behind it. I thought at 9/11 that there was a chance for Americans to stand up and turn the other cheek and, and go – and react in a different way to people who could be so angry against a country that they could do, they could commandeer airplanes and fly them into airplanes. That was just beyond my comprehension. And yet what did we do? We did the same old thing. We went to war ... And that's not the solution...

So we're just here on our little plot of land, growing stuff, and playing with our chickens and, you know, sharing the food as best we can.

This quote beautifully illustrates recurrent themes through my interviews – feeling disenchanting with the prospect of wide-scale, institutional change on the social and environmental issues about

which one cares deeply, participants essentially tell me that while widespread change doesn't seem to be possible, at least *they're* not complicit. To John and Lynn, homesteading is a way to live out their political and ethical commitments when they feel there is little else they can do to affect institutional change, despite their ambivalence around how homesteading impacts current realities. When institutional change does not seem possible, homesteading provides a way to achieve some semblance of moral purity.

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David is a young, divorced father who works for the National Guard and lives in a suburban area. He currently collects rainwater and stores food, and is laying plans to convert to solar electricity as well as raise chickens and rabbits. His current homesteading efforts primarily amount to research and interest in future endeavors; he doesn't actually do much yet. Despite this, he strongly identifies as a Homesteader and Prepper, and has a very articulate and passionate account for why he is interested in these practices.

David is the quintessential example of someone who draws heavily from vocabularies of motive of independence, employing an individualistic lens throughout the interview. He sees himself as a maverick, someone who thinks outside the box and doesn't align to conventional groups. He tells me that he's "free spirited," a quality he supports by telling me that he's changed from identifying as Democrat to Republican to Libertarian. Distancing himself from "both sides" of Democrats and Republicans, he sees himself as fitting into neither category. David tells me he "listens to all" in terms of the news, but "accepts none of it," trusting in his gut and believing what feels right. He tells me that social problems are a result of individual failures that can only be solved by personal responsibility and the restoration of individual rights.

As I discuss in chapter two, David believes that the US is fated to lose its place as a world superpower, and that when this happens foreign dollar holdings will come flooding back into the country and produce extreme hyperinflation. He believes that once this occurs, basic social systems and grids will deteriorate such that society will be "ruled by the gun" and there will be "blood in the streets" as the struggle for survival will pit individuals against one another. David is different than other interviewees in that he is not only pessimistic about the future, but certain that within the next twenty years this specific scenario will occur. He believes the seeds to this future apocalypse have already been sewn, evidenced by an incredibly flawed government and political system representing only special interests; a society that is self-centered, superficial, and ignorant; and the loss of "personal freedom" as companies and corporations have too much power over individual lives, including but not limited to the types of food we eat.

In the face of this strikingly fatalistic perspective, and with it David's loss of a sense of control and security, homesteading is an empowering endeavor – one that restores to him his independent vocabularies of motive. Like John and Lynn, David uses the language of "opting out," but his version has less to do with reducing compliance with unethical systems than it does reducing dependence on excessively powerful and interventionist systems. See, for example, the way David explains his understanding of how the homesteading movement responds to what he perceives to be the erosion of personal freedom.

Detach, unplug, detach. Get away from it all, you know. That's so that, detaching from ... they took the pill and got out of the matrix, you know what I mean? They're like detaching and disconnecting and they're like "We don't, we don't want to be a part of that anymore." We're getting out of the Matrix. ... "We're detaching and getting out of this rat race, we're fed up with it... we don't want to be involved in your commercialism, in your requirements." We're getting out of the Homeowner's Associations, we're getting out of the, the Progress Energy. We're getting out of a contract with Direct TV. We're gonna do our own things from now on. ...

In David's perspective, homesteading is a way to "get away from the fact that you're keeping us from doing what we want to do." David invokes the prepping logic to explain that homesteading will help him face future, as well as current, problems – explaining that homesteading is a way to prepare for the possibility of a major disaster. Homesteading is David's "insurance policy" against inevitable collapse, giving him skills that will be useful to know and trade when there is "blood in the streets." As David explains, "I can't stop it [the problems he perceives, primarily the instability of the dollar] but at least I'll be able to protect *myself*." The opting out frame of homesteading, in this case, empowers David, restoring to him his sense of individual control – despite the fact, as I mentioned above, that he currently is only collecting rainwater.

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For both of the examples above, the *accounts* associated with homesteading – not necessarily the practices – help to restore vocabularies of motive of conscientiousness and independence in the face of feelings of resignation or despair. Each of these accounts are both ideological, connected to coherent belief systems, and contentious, explained as actions of dissent in response to perceived social relations, systems, or cultures. For John and Lynn, their homesteading account gave them a way to explain their life as altruistic and ethical, regardless of whether that life impacted institutional change in the systems about which they were concerned. For David, his homesteading account gave him a way to understand his life as free from the constraints of powerful systems and a sense that he controlled his own fate, despite continuing to believe that the world was crumbling around him. These accounts thus allowed these interviewees to maintain their vocabularies of motive, and thus identities, in the face of negative emotions and perceptions that undermine them.

In this final chapter, I return to the original question of this dissertation – *How do people come to account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action?* First, I analyze how the content of ideological accounts helps to ease identity strain by restoring participants’ ability to claim that they are conscientious and/or independent people. Then, I argue that participants seek out, learn, and invoke ideological accounts when they perform “identity work” for them by restoring their sense of self. By identity work, I mean the “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1348). Leveraging the arguments that I have built in the last two chapters, I contend that participants sought out the ideological accounts of the homesteading movement in a conscious or semi-conscious effort to resolve an identity strain, and that joining the homesteading movement was a deliberate attempt to rationalize, minimize, or transform problematic outlooks and emotions.

### **Ideological Accounts: Resolving Identity Strain**

I argue that adopting the ideological accounts of the homesteading lifestyle help to restore the VOMs of conscientiousness and independence in the face of negativity and inefficacy, easing identity strains generated from the contradiction between the two. Participants hold conscientious and/or independent identities that compel them to respond to perceived social or environmental problems to avoid participating in, or dependence on, the systems against which they situate their identity. Under these conditions – claiming an identity in which one is compelled to act, yet pessimism of the possibility of institutional change – the “opting out” frame of the homesteading movement provides participants a way to account for their actions as responses to social problems without requiring them to account for their institutional impact. In

so doing, the account restores participants' abilities to explain themselves as conscientious and/or independent people.

As a reminder to the reader, I define contentious ideological accounts as the narratives participants offer to explain their lifestyles that are rooted in belief systems that challenge structures of authority – conceptualized broadly to include cultural, relational, and institutional systems. This definition builds on the work of Zald (2000) in understanding social movement behavior as ideologically structured action, Oliver and Johnston's (2000) call to analytically differentiate ideologies from frames, Snow's (2005) appeal to broaden the conception of contention, and Scott and Lyman's (1968) original proposition of accounts as explanations for behavior that form and originate from one's self-presentation.

In this chapter, I detail ideological accounts of homesteading and then analyze how those accounts restore the VOMs of conscientiousness and/or independence. In general, while participants contextualized their homesteading within a wide range of ideologies, they tended to invoke a shared frame – a particular lens through which one interprets and communicates the meaning of an issue or phenomenon (Benford and Snow 2000) – of how their lifestyles manifested these ideologies. Specifically, participants framed their homesteading as an effort to “opt out” of structures they perceived to be problematic through using home-based systems to replace their involvement in larger social systems. Moreover, participants tended to use two versions of the opting out frame – one, that they would reduce their association with and contributions to unethical or harmful systems; and two, that they would reduce their dependence on precarious or dysfunctional systems. These two versions of frames were not mutually exclusive, and many participants drew on both, sometimes in contradictory ways. The opting out frame always organized and concentrated a broader ideological account; for example, some



invoked this frame to explain how they were authentically living out environmentalist ideologies by living lightly on the earth, while others invoked this frame to explain how they were living out conservative political ideology by increasing personal freedom. Multiple, and even conflicting, ideologies can converge around a single frame. For example, in their argument that ideologies and frames are most useful if analyzed as distinct concepts rather than conflated, Oliver and Johnston (2000) give the example of movement activity around abortion, in which the pro-life and pro-choice sides of the debate are grounded in completely opposite ideologies but both use a “rights frame” – around the rights of the child or the mother – to frame the issue.

In the following, I use both the term frame and account deliberately to refer to different, but intimately related, forms of discourse. I use *frame* to refer to the particular logic of opting out, a lens through which participants interpreted their lifestyles in direct and indirect ways. I use the term *account* to refer to the narratives participants offered to explain and describe their homesteading efforts. For example, the participants introduced at the beginning of this chapter – John and Lynn, and David – provide illustrations of the distinction between frames and accounts. Both invoked the frame of opting out, providing the rationale that homesteading efforts allowed them to disengage from problematic systems. Yet they apply this logic to very different accounts of what they are doing and why. To John and Lynn, homesteading is an effort to wipe their hands clean of dirty oil embedded in systems of violence, and in so doing to live a life in service to others by promoting peace. To David, homesteading is an effort to extricate himself from systems doomed to fail so that he will not be negatively impacted by the fall out of system failure. The accounts participants offered were, in many ways, unique narratives that combined a personalized mix of ideologies, rationales, perspectives, and stories. Yet I argue that these accounts were united in their invocation of the opting out frame. My argument in this chapter

and dissertation draws on both concepts. It is through *accounting* for their homesteading lifestyle using the opting out *frame* that participants are able to explain their lifestyles as engaging in dissent and expressing ideological narratives.

### **Homesteading as Opting Out: A Global Frame**

In this chapter, I explore the patterns within accounts of how people framed their motivations for engaging in homesteading practices as a way to “opt out” of systems – ranging from industrial agriculture to globalization to the economy to mainstream commercialistic culture to the school system or banking system. As Rick explains, a homesteader seeks to

live independently from what others are dependent on. So, all the grids that others depend on. So that would be the power grid, food grid, medicine grid, transportation grid, you know, recreation. Every – all the things that people basically go out and consume and buy from others, services ... They’re basically trying to be independently self-sufficient.

This basic framework of self-sufficiency emphasized removing oneself from social systems through seeking to produce in the home rather than consume outside of the home.

Interviewees consistently used the language of deliberate removal when discussing homesteading, as for example when Neal discussed homesteading as a way to “wean ourselves” off of the commerce system, or Heidi discussed it as a way to “extricate people from their reliance on fossil fuels.” In this sense, homesteading is less about what you do, and more about what you *don’t* do because you replace goods and services with your own home production. In this framing, homesteaders refashion participation in the private sphere as a purposive withdrawal from the public sphere and the social systems that comprise it, framing this departure as an intentional choice. Additionally, participants framed their “decisions” (as they describe them, despite constraints or external factors) to adopt homesteading as a process of opting out of previous jobs or lifestyles. Again, this locates the importance of homesteading in those systems and cultures that one leaves behind – the lives that homesteading empowers a person *not* to lead.

In the following sections, I explore two primary versions of the “opting out” frame – opting out as an effort to reduce compliance with social systems, and opting out as an effort to reduce dependence on social systems. I will examine different versions and variations of how participants drew on these frames in their accounts. In the first, participants saw homesteading as a way to reject or boycott the systems with which they did not agree and did not align with their own values, understanding themselves to be taking a stand against such systems by withdrawing support. In the second, participants saw homesteading as a way to decrease reliance on systems understood to be precarious or untrustworthy, in so doing reducing the influence of such systems on their personal lives.

Methodologically, the opting out frame emerged early in interviews as one way that participants accounted for their homesteading practices. Initially, I coded only those accounts that used more explicit language of withdrawal – such as “dropping out” or boycotting – as opting out. Over time, it became more apparent that even participants who did not invoke this explicit language employed the opting out *logic*. Once I began to consider that the accounts I had coded – I had 19 versions identified at one point – were all variations of an opting out narrative, patterns began to emerge among the noise. Thinking of all of accounts I had identified as different forms of opting out, two categories of opting out emerged – that of reducing compliance and reducing dependence. When it was clear that these two categories accommodated all of the specific accounts I had identified, I knew I had discerned upon the right concepts for analysis.

After elaborating how participants draw on these frames in their accounts, I work to show how ideological accounts of homesteading restore to participants a way to re-claim their identities as conscientious and/or independent people when they feel resigned to the intractability

of institutional change. For the conscientious, accounts invoking the opting out frame provide participants a way to explain themselves as informed, ethical citizens – regardless of whether their actions impact or even engage with institutions. For those who explained themselves as conscientious *and* independent, accounts drawing on the opting out frame provided a sense of empowerment – that they can do something, anything, about the issues that they care about when all other options seem ineffectual, restoring claims to both power and altruism. For those who primarily explain themselves using independent VOMs, accounts that deploy the “opting out as reducing dependence” frame provide participants a way to feel like they are regaining power that they felt has been ceded to others, and to feel like they are in charge of their own destiny and well-being. In short, ideological accounts told through the opting out frame resolve the tension created by pessimism and inefficacy by giving participants a way to claim their desired identities despite outlooks that undermine those claims.

### ***Reducing Compliance***

When participants used accounts that drew on the “reducing compliance” version of the opting out frame, they explained homesteading as a way to stop participating in systems they understand to be unethical, harmful, or incompatible with their values. As Kylah tells me,

[Farming] became more and more political and social as I got into it. That I started to recognize that people were making really conscious decisions to do that as a radical act. To not be a part of a system that they didn't agree with. So to stop supporting corporations that they didn't agree with and to stop supporting – especially major food corporations and chemical corporations ...

Similar to this logic, several other participants told me that growing their own food allowed them to stop supporting the industrial agriculture system and withdraw their support from GMOs, pesticides, and animal abuse; or that through producing and trading their own products they are able to participate in an alternative economy; or that they no longer need to work as many hours to purchase the things they need and so were able to quit participating in American materialism.

In this framing, participants explain each action performed in the home as one less transaction with systems fraught with problems, a form of resistance akin to boycott. As Chad and Laurie, former fundamentalist Christians who seek to live intentionally in all respects, tell me,

[Homesteading is] a way to world peace. If we can stop fighting over oil, lessen our dependence on it, grow our own food and develop real communities, then we can ... learn to live together and within the ecosystem that's already here. That's a lot of it too. It is an activism. It is a way of saying "I'm not gonna be, I don't want to be part of that system..." (Chad)

To Chad, homesteading is a way to take a stand against systems through willingly removing oneself from them. Many participants recognized that, as Keith told me, "There's no real way to completely cut yourself off from ... the food production system, the energy system ..." Instead, he and his wife Kristin explained, "It's not a black and white thing ... it's more a matter of degree of participation or resistance." Often, this opting out was traced specifically to consumption, with participants seeking to reduce their consumption of particular products – oil, food, medicine – that they felt were produced within unsustainable or unhealthy systems.

Accounts using this version of the opting out frame focused on discontinuing support for a given system, making homesteading less about the lifestyle one is engaged in and more about the rejection of the other lifestyles that one has the power to lead – that homesteading enables a person to *not* to engage in. To participants, voluntarily homesteading – opting in – is thus fundamentally different than homesteading for necessity because homesteading for necessity does not replace other more harmful lifestyle options. As Keith explains to me,

[I used to work with poor, Hispanic folks in an urban setting] and they had for many years lived virtually off the grid because the city was so slow to provide the basic things that folks needed. And people there, they had chickens in their backyard before it was cool. They were growing vegetables before it was hip. You know, like, they were making stuff and repairing old stuff ... before any of the white hipsters ever thought of it. ... there are people without money that have been doing it for a long time out of necessity. And that's different ...

I don't have to create an alternative in order to survive. You know, this is something we're choosing. The people that are running the system – the political system, the economic system – don't give a shit what [people forced to homestead] are doing. They don't vote generally, they don't have any money. Now, when they see a bunch of white folks with some means starting to do something – now that's interesting.

In this point, Keith lays bare the logic that many other interviewees employ less directly – homesteading is meaningful when it constitutes a rejection of other conventional options that make one complicit to the system. And, that homesteading matters when the people adopting it have power and money – the currency that runs the systems they leave.

Employing a slightly different version of this frame, people cast their homesteading as a way to reject mainstream culture and values. For example, Rick tells me he believes homesteading is growing because young people are “unplugging from materialism and ... recognizing that there's something else that's gotta be more fulfilling.” He then frames his decision to homestead as part of his rejection of the American Dream, elaborating,

I could see what I needed to do to make a “shitload of money,” but I rejected that. ... Because I was born into a family and into a community that was essentially rich, I could see the limitations of wealth and I could see that it did not produce happiness. I didn't go after the American dream like most people go after the American dream. I thought the American dream was a little bankrupt actually, you know? ... it was a very materialistic dream, the American dream. I rejected that because I could see the decay in that dream.

In this, Rick casts his decision to homestead as a deliberate choice to participate in an alternative value system. Similarly, Nathan tells me that homesteading is growing because “I think a growing proportion of society that's rejecting a lot of these, you know, over-commercialization, over-industrialization ...” While others were less explicit in describing homesteading as a stand against mainstream culture, they implicitly make this case by claiming that homesteading is the antithesis of meaningless culture. For example, notice the way that Angie describes her weekends relative to abstract “others”:

... we don't have any meaningless time whatsoever. And what we mean by that is, is you know, you go to work on Monday and ask everybody "How was your weekend, what'd you do?" And they watched this TV show and they went shopping here and they took their kids to all of their extra-curricular activities. And that was their weekend. Well we [laughs] you know, we watched chicks being born. We got a field ready for planting. You know, we planted 68 new apple trees. Things like that. That's what we do on a weekend.

Similar to Rick and Nathan, Angie constructs homesteading as the “meaningful life” that does not participate in conventional norms; Angie and her husband Mike see themselves as choosing an alternative path and electing not to indulge in empty, superficial mainstream values.

For many participants, the implicit goal of their participation in homesteading was to achieve a sense of moral purity. Keith, describing (and critiquing) this motive of others, explains this effort: “a lot of it I feel like is motivated by a desire for a kind of purity – almost like a moral purity. By cutting yourself off from the system, you're keeping your hands clean and you're proving your own personal righteousness.” While no participant explicitly claimed this – in fact, as I discuss below, many worked to show how their efforts were altruistic – the logic was widespread that an ethical life meant one in which they *disengaged* from problematic systems rather than *engaged* with systems by seeking to change them for the better. This logic echoes throughout all of the quotes of this section. The largely uncritical assumption that the most virtuous choice was to exit, rather than fight against, certain systems was apparent in the widespread framing of homesteading practices as the ethical or moral choice. Dean tells me they started raising chickens because they have always “been concerned about the ethical treatment of everybody and everything,” Peter tells me he that living a more “ecologically responsible life” through helping to start an intentional community was about “raising as much of your own food as possible without being compulsive and obsessive about it., and living as far off the grid as possible.” In this, participants accept that the principled choice is to withdraw.

Despite the more individualistic choice to disengage, participants sought to explain how their homesteading practices helped the world and humanity; as Keith tells me, “I want to live in a way that is a gift to the rest of the world.” Participants who desired to explain their practices as altruistic and impactful offered one of a few different logics, elaborated below, to explain how an individual opting out of systems created social change. I stress that these accounts, however efficacious they appear, co-existed with pessimistic visions of the future and cynicism that change would occur. Participants told me *how* homesteading could effect change, but doubted that it *did* or *could* – sometimes within the timespan of a few minutes. The explanation of how opting out addressed social problems, and in so doing helped others, following one of three logics. In the first, participants told me that individuals opting out en masse captures the attention of power brokers, who change the system to reflect the wishes of the public. In the second, participants told me that their lifestyle provided a “model” which others could follow, prompting the spread of a new and better way of living. In the third, participants told me that they were participating in building new, alternative systems that would ultimately replace the old. I examine each of these logics in turn.

In the most ostensibly efficacious account that draws on the opting out frame, the accumulation of homesteading practices democratically put pressure on those in charge of institutions to then change those systems. For example, when Keith tells me that homesteading “subverts” the system each time “you move from consumption to production,” his wife Kristin explains how in saying,

Every purchase is a vote. And people are paying attention to the numbers, to money. So, if we're not spending our money on the normal eggs we would buy or on a higher electricity bill, people are noticing that. Or, you know, we are spending money on, solar living, those companies are growing and people are paying attention to that.



For many, this withdrawal was framed very concretely as ceasing to contribute your money to some systems; institutions would follow the money. Isaac elaborates this perspective, telling me,

You stop becoming completely compliant with the marketing goals of companies and the food grid and gradually they have to change. If anybody wants to make money, we're still a capitalistic system for the most part. Wal-Mart has to change its behaviors based upon what people are buying. So if they go and they buy junk, then they're going to serve them up more junk. If they buy the food, the GMO food, they're just going to keep serving it up and putting it on the shelves. If they stop buying greens, which are good for them, then they won't carry much in the way of greens anymore.... So we can change things little by little, it takes a lot of effort, it takes a lot of education.

This “boycott” sort of perspective was directly employed by some. Others didn’t explain this idea in direct detail, but told me that they saw confirmation of the success of homesteading in the shift of products being offered commercially. When Blake tells me that homesteading effects change, he explains that big box stores like Walmart and Lowes now carry organic lines, telling me “They are finding that it makes sense financially because there's enough of a demand for that kind of thing at these big box stores where there may not have been five or ten years ago.” I will point out that this logic muddles homesteading with the other sorts of activities people do out of the same set of values or concerns, such as *buying* organic food. Regardless of this logical inconsistency, a handful of people offered this reasoning to me.

The second logic that people used to explain how homesteading impacted social change was the idea of “modeling” – that by embodying another way of living, others would see and then adopt the lifestyle. Rick, for instance, explained his homesteading in this way in saying,

I was innovating all the time – solar power, straw bale construction, farm animal sanctuary, natural swimming pool. You know, I was like trying to set an example of how we ought to be living as a culture, you know? Trying to set a model of sustainability.

This modeling logic assumes that, to the extent that homesteading can effect change, the *locus* of change was the individual<sup>9</sup> – individuals influencing other individuals would bring about change, as opposed to the idea that individuals should direct their efforts toward the institutions they find problematic. In accounting for their homesteading, people told me that it had the potential to transform individuals’ understanding of the world; for example, Julia tells me that once “you start questioning big systems it becomes easier to question all of them,” asserting that homesteading changes one’s perspective on all systems. Relatedly, Dan tells me that engaging in homesteading teaches people on an intuitive level that everything is interconnected and so makes people better environmentalists. By encouraging people to adopt the lifestyle, these participants thus claim that they are in turn changing others’ perspectives and worldviews, which indirectly and in aggregate impact the larger world. The idea that change begins on the individual level through individual transformation weaves throughout my interviews.

In the third logic, participants discussed the power of building an alternative system – to strengthen others’ ability to opt out, and ultimately replace troublesome systems. In explanations that used this framing, participants left intact old systems but explained their actions as seeking to create new worlds within the walls of the old – similar to the prefigurative strategies of other movements (e.g. Breines 1989). Here, for example, Peter explains that there is another alternative to my question around whether things are more likely to get better or worse.

There is a third alternative. If enough people start to live an alternative life and others – and this is partly a motivation for me and the people that I’m with right now – that maybe there’s a way through community activism, community living, worker owned businesses, more involvement with co-ops... There are thousands and thousands of these examples around the country and they’re growing...

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<sup>9</sup> A very select few – two interviewees – did bring up the idea that institutions could learn from their model of the homesteading lifestyle. Todd explains generally that “you can learn” from homesteading and “apply that to a larger scale,” and Blake tells me that his off-grid lifestyle forces laws, regulations, and housing codes to change to accommodate his lifestyle, then making it easier for others to participate.

These are good signs. *I don't know how long and if it's possible to change the world by example.* I just don't know.

In other words, if enough people opt out of the system, they can recreate the world through inspiring others to follow their lead. Some explained that building alternative systems is important because it gives others the ability to choose to opt out as well. As Kylah explains,

Um, but I don't think that you can – like I don't believe in dismantling things just for sake of it. Um, I think having better options first is important. And so I think that the more people who are self-sufficient and the more people who farm and do that commercially, even on a small scale, I think gives people options, it gives people better options. And if you can then educate your community and educate people to make better decisions I think a lot of people will.

In this sort of logic, the goal is not necessarily to change old institutions, but rather to replace them; notice that Kylah does not frame the solution as changing or fixing the system, but rather “dismantling” old ones and creating new choices.

To summarize, accounts drawing on this form of the opting out frame emphasized ceasing to participate in systems to withdraw consent or support. For many, home production was framed as a way to boycott production systems, and voluntarily reduce the money spent within certain institutions. For others, it was depicted as a rejection of cultural values. Lastly, the portrayed goal of these practices was for some moral purity, for others to send a message to the powerful, for others to model the ideal lifestyle, and for others to construct alternative systems to replace the old.

### *Restoration of Conscientiousness*

I argue that accounts drawing on the opting out frame restore to participants the vocabulary of motive of conscientiousness in the face of pessimism and inefficacy. Such accounts provide participants a way to explain their actions as dedicated to the greater good, while leaving intact their resignation that current institutions are beyond fixing. This account constructs a version of altruism that does not require collective efficacy by explaining how self-

focus is oriented toward others and articulating a version of “making a difference” that focuses on indirect outcomes of disengagement and building alternatives to the system that allow current, problematic institutions to stay intact. The opting out frame thus bypasses collective efficacy while preserving participants’ moral integrity and their ability to claim that they respond to the social and environmental problems of which they are aware. Ultimately, this allows participants to feel pessimistic and resigned while simultaneously feeling positively about their place in the world. Lastly, this frame provides a way to demonstrate to others that one is ethical and informed when other avenues to display ones’ awareness of social issues and morality seem futile (such as activism or collective action). I will elaborate each of these points below.

For many participants, this account enabled them to continue to claim that they were politically engaged by recasting activism to include individual lifestyle choices. For example, Lucky explains that he doesn’t participate in political protests or consider himself an environmentalist because he tends to see activism as a “negative.”

I still will do advocacy for certain things. But it's just, I guess it's just in a different way. (And what way is that?) I mean I, we buy organic food. We, I mean we use our dollar as a political activity. We, you know, buy organic food or grow our own food as much as we can.

Lucky defines advocacy as manifesting one’s beliefs in individual lifestyle choices – and sees this as a more “positive” form of politics than conventional advocacy. Similarly, when I ask Julia if she has ever been involved in activism, she replies,

Sure. I consider the way I spend my money as a form of activism. And definitely milking my own goats is a form of activism. And every home birth I've ever attended, and homeschooling my kids. Definitely writing a book. (Jordan: How do you see those as activism?) Teaching by example. I'm not going to say pushing my opinion, but making my opinion available. And definitely voting with my money. And supporting small farms, and supporting organic produce.

Participants not only expand the notion of activism to accommodate lifestyle choices, but tell me that this is the most authentic and effective form of political participation, rather than collective action or direct lobbying. This framing provides participants a way to explain why they are not engaged in collective action against institutions, rejecting this as an inauthentic and ineffective form of activism. See, for example, the way Christine discusses how cynical she feels about signing petitions and leaving problem-solving to the powers-the-be.

I, you will not find me forwarding a Save the Bees campaign or you know, "Hey, well you need to tell congress –" Congress doesn't give a shit about that petition. You need to do another, more constructive thing. Vote with your feet, vote with your dollars.

Politics and morality was understood to be one's individual "embodiment" of the "right way" to live, making politics divorced from direct engagement with institutions of power.

Moreover, accounts using the reducing compliance frame gave participants narratives to explain how self-focus was more altruistic than direct interaction with others. Interviewees offered me several rationales for why a self-focused endeavor was not self-interested, sometimes engaging in what mental gymnastics to make this claim. First, several offered to me the logic that "If I care better for myself, I can better care for the world." See how Leah, for example, tells me how she recently has started focusing on her own "personal growth," explaining,

I still do care a lot about sustainability, but I also care about sustaining myself more in the sense of like the wholeness of myself, not just like the physical – but enriching my life and doing things that make me happy because ultimately the happier I am the better person I will be for everyone around me. And the more I will care about like the environment and animals and what not.

Similarly, notice the way that Lem explains his endeavors to be more self-sufficient.

I like to think of [self-sufficiency] more in terms of just sort of taking care of myself so that others don't have to take care of the things that I can take care of myself. And that I'm more able to take care of others who need help.

In this framing, Lem works to show how *self*-sufficiency is an altruistic endeavor. Secondly, people told me that to fix the world, individuals need to fix themselves. For example, David explains to me,

Both sides keep pointing fingers at somebody else saying "fix this problem," but really the problem that needs to be fixed by themselves. You need to fix your own problems before you can fix the entire, the bigger structure.

Lastly, participants framed the response to social problems as a matter of "personal responsibility" – as when Peter told me he reduced his two-car household to one car out of a "sense of personal responsibility toward dealing with issues of climate change..." – thus implying that social problems are fixed by individuals making different decisions.

These individualistic rationales directly contrasted with participants' discussions of problems and injustice, which they almost exclusively traced to larger systems and institutions – not poor individual decisions. For example, notice how Heidi and Keith discuss the root cause of perceived problems as capitalism itself:

I think that interest-based capitalism is, uh, is something that I have a lot of problems with and I think causes, um, impoverishment and starvation and, and environmental destruction and catastrophe (*Heidi*).

I would name the problem as capitalism. To use the big system word – but, I mean, that is what's going on. That's why our food system and our energy systems are the way they are. (*Kristin*: Mmm). It's because the bottom line is making a profit for investors and corporate heads (*Keith*).

Those concerned about the food system traced its root causes to modern industrial agriculture, telling me things such as,

And, you know, medical research, scientific research is starting to show that a lot of the cancer problems in our, in, in our American society in particular can be linked to modern food production (*Mike*).

Because I whole heartedly believe what we are today as a population, the downward spiral of our health is affected by what we are... allowed to eat. (*Cassie*). By what is available to eat. (*Murray*).

As a last example, those who identified as Preppers traced their sense of doom to large-scale, systematic problems.

A lot of it boils down to, you know, things that are impacting people today. I mean, unemployment. You know, you read the news, unemployment's dropping it looks very rosy. Until you start digging in and realize a lot of jobs being created are not the same paying jobs that people lost. A lot of the jobs are part time, are seasonal or contract. You know, a lot of jobs don't have the same benefits ... The other, is you know, the rise in food prices. I mean, you know, that is, you know, definitely in your face (Xander).

In all of these examples – capitalism, the food system, and the economy – participants trace the origin of problems to systemic issues. In participants' discussions of social and environmental problems, there was often a disjuncture between analyses of social problems rooted in systems, and then the posing of individual-level solutions.

Accounts using this opting out frame – and its individualistic focus – helped to restore participants' understanding of themselves as conscientious by restoring their claim to *impact*. Participants felt that they never could see the impacts of their actions when they engaged with large structures and institutions, but that they could see their impacts when they focused on small-scale interactions and their daily lives. For these individuals, homesteading restored their sense that they are “making a difference” by reducing what it means to make a difference to a very small scale. Kylah discusses at length how she believes homesteading can “inspire” neighbors to adopt the lifestyle and live a little differently, and how this can “affect a community.” She tells me,

Which, to me, is I feel like I'm more capable of that than dismantling these gigantic, um, you know, national and international corporations that are like so destructive.

... And I think that [individuals feeling more connected and peaceful] can have ripples effects in their lives with their small community... I don't know if it's all the change that, you know, is like necessary to preserve the environment. But I think that it is something. *It's the most accessible thing that I can think of.*

When I follow up on these ideas later in the interview and ask her to tell me more about why she thinks that local change is more possible than federal change, she tells me that she felt like her protesting phrase “never felt effective,” and that she left feeling like “I’m just yelling.” In contrast to this perceived inefficacy of protesting, she explains,

For me, as soon as I started becoming involved with food ... it was as simple as when I was making cheese, I would give someone a piece of cheese. And they had never had real cheese before. They had only eaten, you know, Kraft American Singles. And having that moment of revelation that it can taste really good and that would start a conversation about cows ... And I realized that I was starting to have these conversations with people and see them light up and see these things I didn't even know people didn't know. And see people get really inspired and excited. ... And to me that just seems so much more human, it seems so much more possible to like connect with people and not just be shouting at deaf ears.

Kylah, in other words, is better able to explain how she effects change when she focuses on her lifestyle and the encouragement of others to adopt that lifestyle than she ever was able to see her actions as influential when she was seeking to “dismantle” the huge “machine” and “yelling at deaf ears.” This sort of impact, in her eyes, is more accessible – she can achieve it and see it in a way she couldn’t in more traditional activism.

All of these individualistic logics allow participants to claim they are making a difference without needing to believe that their actions impact the institutions about which they are concerned. Similarly, the “building alternatives” logic restores to participants a way to explain their actions as having an impact, without having any direct outcomes on the problems one perceives. To be clear, I argue that ideological accounts using the opting out frame restores conscientious identities by giving people efficacious *accounts* through providing a focus on individuals fixing themselves or impacting other individuals; I am *not* arguing that the opting out frame restores efficacy in institutional change. It is the loss of such belief in institutional, wide-spread change that brings people to homesteading, and accounts incorporating the opting out



frame that provide participants a new way of thinking about what it means to make a difference and ultimately to be a good person.

Lastly, I argue that the narrative of homesteading as an effort to reduce compliance restores to participants a way to *demonstrate* their conscientiousness to others, when other means of doing so (such as political engagement or activism) seem futile. Participants explained homesteading to me as a way to communicate or express their beliefs in a visible way that others could see. See, for example, the way Emily explains homesteading as a form of activism,

It is an ... assertion, right? That I'm going to reject this kind of dominant ideology of market forces in certain ways. Um, and so however individuated and, you know however personal it is to an individual ... it's still nonetheless, like even if they're aware of it or not, a political statement about rejecting these kind of widely available products.

Others see homesteading in a similar light – a way to make a “statement” or “assertion” about their beliefs. Some even describe one of their main reasons for homesteading this effort to show others their commitments. As Anna explains,

I want a very visible – like our beliefs are so visible from our house. Like you walk up to our house – like we have solar panels on the front of our house. Like our beliefs and our ideas and our values are visible for everybody who walks by.

Participants discussed with me how homesteading enabled them to symbolically show others their commitments, without having to be preachy or forceful in advocating for their ideas.

In short, accounts using the opting out frame give participants narratives to explain how *disengagement* with collective institutions, which I argue is prompted by resignation and disheartenment, is actually oriented toward the collective good – restoring participants’ claims to conscientiousness.

### *The Intersection of Conscientiousness & Independence*

Additionally, accounts that employed the reducing compliance version of the opting out account restored to participants their vocabularies of independence as well. This account

provided a sense of empowerment to individuals – specifically, the ability to respond to the issues about which they were concerned. Participants discussed homesteading as their last option to respond – the only space where they felt they continued to have power. When participants felt like they were living in a world in which they were paralyzed in their ability to fight back against perceived problems, the account of homesteading restores claims to agency.

Accounts that use the opting out logic enable participants to explain that they are doing something to address the issues about which they are concerned when institutional change seems hopeless. For example, Christine teaches “sustainable living” classes in order to “inspire and empower” others to lead similar lifestyles, telling me,

They need to do it because it's good for the planet... rather than feeling helpless in this food system or watching a place, you know, watching a film like “Food, Inc.” or “Food Matters” or any of those, it's a way of giving people the skills to not feel powerless. And to actually do something to make their lives and other lives better.

Homesteading, then, provides Christine with a way to feel “empowered,” granting her the power to do something within her own control. When social systems seem hopeless, abandoning them to do something on one’s can seem like the only option. As Christine tells me, her homesteading came from her “sense of injustice” of the lack of sustainability, ethics, and health in food systems. She tells me, “I didn’t like what I saw, so I took my own boys and my home and did it on my own.” This idea of taking matters into one’s own hands echoes throughout my interviews; individual production gave participants agency in the face of resignation.

For some, this framing of “empowerment” was discussed as a way to re-instill positive emotions when pessimism dominates one’s perspective. In other words, when it seems impossible to escape involvement with “negative” systems, homesteading enables a person to feel that at least they’re attempting to engage in something positive – even if they don’t feel it ultimately will not amount to much. Lucky is a great case study of this sort of perspective. When

Lucky discusses global warming and the military industrial complex at length, I ask him if he sees homesteading as connected to these issues. He responds,

Maybe, yeah. And that's where I see more hopeful, that's why I think it's a positive thing, I think it's more hopeful when people are seeing that – there's a certain part of me that does have fear that we're going from a democracy into more of a corporate oligarchy. And I see elections that are completely bought and paid for, politicians that are bought and paid for. And some of us who are lower on the totem pole, it can make you feel a little powerless.

But, you can actually take back some of your power by learning some skills, especially empowerment skills that allow you to do some of the basic things that humans need. So ... I think that probably for me it's a way that I can feel like I'm doing something... spending my political dollar ...

In this exchange, Lucky tells me that homesteading restores to him a sense of “doing something” to affect the issues about which he cares when he feels “a little bit powerless.” In various ways, participants told me that when they feel helpless, incapable of affecting seemingly massive problems, homesteading gives them a way to do something within their power in response to these issues – despite the fact that they're unsure whether this makes a difference. In this framing, they are able to reclaim their own power and agency, as well as their sense that they are good people participating in “positive” things.

Interestingly, within accounts homesteading was often framed as a sort of “last resort” option – something to do in the absence of other viable options rather than a strategically chosen response. Rather than a belief that lifestyle changes are the answer, they present their choice to engage in lifestyle movements as the remaining option when they came to feel disenchanting and disempowered. Peter articulates this perspective beautifully in saying,

I guess my current feeling on it – I'll reduce it to one sentence – is "Ok, since I'm not gonna, on my own or even with activism, change what's going on, maybe I can change my own way of living. And maybe through that, and this is certainly not guaranteed, the [intentional] community that I become a part can serve as an example for others who say "I really like what you're doing, I like, I like what you stand for, I like the way you're living this dream."

This framing, which employs the “modeling” logic discussed earlier in this chapter, presents homesteading, as do so many others in this study, as an effort that they are “at least” doing something, when nothing else seems effective. Similarly, Neal tells me that he has no ability to “influence presidential executive power” or “the North Carolina General Assembly.” Rather, he explains, “I realized that I can’t change people, places, or things. There’s only one thing that I can change and that’s myself.”

Similarly, participants told me that they chose to focus on where they had the most control and influence – their own lives. In this, participants often contrasted these efforts with the larger institutional efforts or collective action which they had come to feel were ineffective. Note the way that Leah responds when I ask her if she is a political person.

Leah: Yes and no. I definitely have been more of that in the past and, right now I’m feeling more of like being for things than spending time being against things.

Jordan: Can you tell me more about what you mean by that?

Leah: I mean just like, I guess again going back to the like creating my reality and like *creating the changes that I want to see versus like spending a lot of energy being like against these huge things that I don’t even really have much power over. Like I have the power to create in my existence and in my interactions with people and, in my day-to-day activities like how I go about them and my intention and my focus.*

Again, homesteading takes the place of larger efforts when one comes to feel that they are futile;

Leah used to be involved in more activism, but no longer is. Carla responds similarly, telling me that she engages in homesteading because,

I think we can take charge of our own personal health in a way that I can’t solve the problem in Vietnam. I mean that’s like an exaggerated example. But I think that the choice to be a vegetarian is a personal choice even if it has political ramifications – and it does I believe. It’s still a personal decision. Whereas – I mean I have an *opinion* about whether we should be in Vietnam and lots of opinions about like the Civil Rights movement and Women’s Movement and what feminism is gonna do for us, or against us or whatever.

To Carla, she has the ability to control her personal health in a way that she simply does not have over larger issues about which she is concerned, but feels powerless to change. Homesteading restores her sense of power and ability to respond to at least some issues that concern her.

In all of these examples, accounts of homesteading as reducing compliance with unethical systems enables participants to draw on *both* vocabularies of conscientiousness and independence. These vocabularies are blended into an emphasis on restoring the power to be conscientious – the power to engage in the social and environmental issues one finds concerning, without engaging directly with institutions.

### ***Reducing Dependence***

In the second version of the opting out frame, participants explained homesteading as a way to reduce their dependence on dysfunctional systems that could no longer be trusted to act in their self-interest, and were seen to be encroaching too far on their individual lives. For example, participants framed homesteading as a way to escape the negative health consequences of industrial agriculture, the decisions of a corrupt government, or the compulsory payments and regulations of the “grid.” In accounts that invoked this version of the opting out frame, the emphasis was less on compliance with unethical systems than on dependence on unstable or dysfunctional systems. As Isaac explains, his response to problematic systems is to “pull out” of them and return to the home.

Ok, my solution – even though I don't think it's necessarily possible – my solution for everything would be that...we would be long suffering and not extremists. That, we pull our children out of school systems that are indoctrinating them in the wrong matter. That we start homeschooling, that we start taking responsibility for our own homes. I think everything starts in the home. ...

Self-sufficiency and independence were understood to increase one's autonomy – as well as security, stability, and general welfare – by reducing dependence on systems that were perceived to be more likely to negatively impact one's life than to support it.

The central foundation of accounts that emphasized the reduction of dependence was the perspective that homesteading was a way to achieve self-sufficiency and self-reliance. In fact, the idea that homesteading was a pathway to self-sufficiency was a perspective that was ubiquitous, even for those that focused on opting out as a way of withdrawing support from unethical systems. Within participants whose accounts highlighted the reduction of dependence, there was an additional layer that dependence of any form was an inherently negative or precarious thing – regardless of whether the systems were problematic. As David succinctly describes,

We rely so much on a second or third party to get everything. We rely on the city ... to get us water. We rely on Food Lion to give us our supermarket meals. We rely on Time Warner cable to get us our internet, we rely on this and that, we rely on so-and-so satellite TV.

... So, I started gettin' into doing things for myself. And, that's where that aspect came from. Where, I started doing the homesteading, like making your own things, doing your own things, being more self-sufficient, self-sustaining.

In other words, reliance on institutions was seen as fundamentally, universally negative.

Homesteading was seen as a way to achieve self-sufficiency for the purpose of removing from dysfunctional systems. Neal employs this perspective often, describing his homesteading as a way to “wean” himself from “the needs of being beholden to the economic system,” as well as various other systems. He explains,

What purpose does homesteading serve in a person's life? Is it the ability at some level to create a safety net? Is it the ability to wean yourself off of large scale agribusiness? Is it the ability to begin to produce a barter-able product?

[later in the interview] ... what does it look like to begin to wean ourselves off of the, in various forms and fashions, off the commerce system? How can we

begin to engage each other with products of our own manufacture? ... So that we engage in mutually beneficial exchange without having to deal with the federal reserve bank.

In this perspective, opting out is less about being involved in something that is considered dirty or tainted, but more concretely escaping the personal impacts of being involved in such systems – whether it be the negative repercussions of the bad decisions of the powerful, or simply the feeling of a loss of control over one’s individual life. Many, for example, told me they used homesteading to avoid the negative health consequences of eating food produced through large-scale industrial agriculture. For instance, Hannah – a 70-year-old woman who started engaging in homesteading to occupy her 11 children and 30 foster children – details many of the “scary” things about our current food system, telling me, “And um, it’s something to think about but it’s not something to go like “AHH!” [raises her hands in the air, like the sky is falling. She laughs, and so do I.] However, if I can raise my own chicken, I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna, I’m gonna do it.” The key idea in this perspective is that producing things oneself frees you from the unpredictability and problems of larger systems.

Not only is self-sufficiency understood to be a way to escape the negative repercussion of systems, but also as a way to restore the ability to direct one’s own life. Cassie, for example, explains that part of her reason for homesteading is to avoid being forced to comply with unnecessary regulations imposed on food production, and Rick tells me that he built a straw-bale house to avoid the constraining housing code. As Isaac explained,

We have this huge system that's kind of trying to control everything... I, I'd almost say everybody's afraid of it, but, I, I think people are at the point where they're more mad about it now ... You know, you guys are gonna screw up and make all this genetic crap, and you're gonna try to create financial systems that are gonna be overburdening to us, and, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna take myself out of the system and do what I want to do.

When systems are “overburdening,” homesteading is a way to restore a person’s individual freedom, a theme that Isaac discusses throughout the interview. David also associates self-sufficiency with a renewed sense of freedom, telling me that Homesteaders were not seeking to start a “revolution” but simply “to get away from the fact that, you're keeping us from doing what we want to do.”

Opting out of the system was described not only as a way to achieve freedom, but also as an avenue toward increasing *security*. In this framing, because one is not subject to the whims of precarious systems, his/her life is more stable, free from the problems created from dependency. Neal, who had suddenly lost a business in the recession, tells me that homesteading is an effort to “create a safety net.” Blake, whose home mortgage had been turned upside down during the housing crisis, tells me it’s a way to “not have financial strain, not have food security issues, not have water security issues.” Lastly, Mike, watching his parents’ retirement dwindle, tells me that “self-sufficiency is a pretty good insurance policy against uncertainty.” This idea, taken for granted as obvious by many of my interviewees, showed the extent to which people were embedded in cultures that used independent vocabularies of motive. Within the homesteading lifestyle, as Hannah tells me, one is “at the mercy of the elements,” and removed from social safety nets designed to absorb problems through diverse economies of scale. In short, homesteading is not a lifestyle that is inherently or naturally “secure.” And yet participants felt that, because their lives were more squarely situated within their own control, their lives were safer and more stable than had they been dependent on systems.

Lastly, self-sufficiency was not always conceptualized as individualistic or self-centered; some participants conceptualized self-sufficiency as a goal for small communities, and described to me how self-sufficiency was other-focused. Their logic, however, was the same – that by



opting out and reducing dependence on larger national or international systems, communities would be more resilient, secure, and free. Some participants discussed self-sufficiency as a community property rather than on a household level; as Cassie tells me, “If you get with a farmer that raises Alpaca and you have an aptitude for spinning the wool, and then somebody else can knit it. That’s actually homesteading.” This community self-sufficiency, in which local communities are more autonomous and self-supporting, was in some cases then described as a valuable goal for communities. Lem, for instance, tells me that self-sufficiency is “necessary for a health community.”

There's this reality in which there's a level of self-sufficiency that I think is necessary for a healthy community ... I think that our communities are stronger when those who are resourceful and take care of themselves. And aren't as dependent upon either big corporations or big government stepping in and doing that for them ... [Homesteading] creates communities that are stronger and healthier. And more dignified because they can take care of themselves.

Relatedly, Neal discusses self-sufficiency as a goal for small communities, as evidenced by his unsuccessful bid for mayor of his town on a homesteading platform.

The opting out frame was particularly crystallized in the account of “preparation” – that homesteading was an effort to “prep” for the possibility of disaster or collapse through increasing self-sufficiency and reducing dependence on larger systems. In this preparation account, participants believed that by learning the skills of self-reliance, they would be buffered from system breakdowns and more resilient in the event of full system failure. This account is oriented toward the future rather than the present, less concerned with current problems than about what those current problems indicate about future destruction. This account was drawn on both by people who identified as “Preppers” and those who had never ever heard the term – though it was most developed in those who identified as such. Additionally, this account knew no political boundaries; while the Prepper identity was more likely to be used by political

conservatives, the prepper language was used by a much more diverse group. The preparation code was one of the few codes that I applied to almost every single interview. While some drew on this account by name, many others employed its logic in various ways. In general, participants who engaged this perspective explained their homesteading as a way to get ready for the possibility of break futures through reducing dependency on unstable systems.

The starting point for many who used this account, as I discuss in the chapter two, was the general concern that something bad could happen. Consider, for example, the following quotes, taken from two different interviews:

.. a lot of the stuff I'd been picking up on is just get ready to prepare for some bad things happening in the world. It's not all doom and gloom but, when you don't pay your bills the lights go out. So America might start wanting to consider the fact they might want to get ready for the lights to go out. (*David*)

I think our country as a whole is a lot less stable right now than it used to be. Especially with the extremely high national debt. And the fact that we're probably facing bankruptcy. And having credit cut off by other countries. We have a huge trade imbalance and that can't go on forever. So at some point, something bad is going to happen. At least I'd like to be able to raise some food. And I think we all need to know a lot of basic skills. (*Diane*)

Interviewees told me it was important to imagine what would happen if such a disaster occurred, and consider what you would be able to do to remain strong in the face of collapse. As Mary lightheartedly asks me, "If the world ended tomorrow, what would you be able to do for yourself?"

Those who employed this preparation account told me, explicitly and implicitly, that the best way to prepare for possible future problems was self-sufficiency. By having skills to take care of yourself, as Hannah explains, you are not at the "mercy of tragedy."

...It's at our own peril that we become totally dependent on the supermarket [laughs]. I think it goes along with only having one or two kinds of chicken or cows... We don't know what's going to happen in the world. We all sail along like – I mean, I'm not gloom and doom. I'm not saying it would happen. But, let's think about it, you know. You see a little bit of it when we lose power, we

have an ice storm and we lose power. When we lose power, we have a gas-powered generator, we have a heat - we have three heat sources in the house that aren't dependent on anything but wood. A gas stove, that will continue to flow on the top burners. So, even that kind of thing, you know, we're not at the mercy of. When you know how to put up your own food, you're not at the mercy of tragedy in some ways.

People told me that they were better prepared for various sorts of possible tragedies. Some, like Hannah, spoke of natural disasters. But several others discussed man-made disasters – economic collapse, war, the failure of social security, globalization, or the spread of disease or contaminants through the food system. Many framed their homesteading as providing them a buffer against catastrophes to which others would be subject. Rick, for instance, describes homesteading as his “arc,” referencing the biblical story of Noah’s Ark.

... I'm not one of the Survivalists. [But] 10%, 20% of my motivation is – I'm creating a little bit of an arc here... there's going to be a slow winding down here. There's gonna be --when I say slow, it's gonna be rapid, it's gonna be over the next 100 years. But there's gonna be a big fucking badass shift. And what we're going to do is we're gonna have to go local. And we're gonna have to be growing our own food, making our own energy. And ... the way I'm living is the way people will be giving their left arm to live when shit hits the fan. ...

In short, people told me that if they were self-reliant they would not be impacted by social and environmental issues which would ultimately be the downfall of others.

Lastly, some who drew on the prepping account combined it with other-oriented or community-driven motives. For example, Diane tells me that she preps out of her love for her children and grandchildren.

Jordan: When did you start to feel like you wanted to be prepared for disasters?

Diane: When my first child was born. Because I realized my whole life had changed. I had this awesome responsibility for life. And then I had a second one. And then eventually grandchildren you know. And I would do anything. But, you cannot – throughout history things have happened. And we don't know what will happen. But I would just like to, to have an edge on preparing for those children if something does.

In this, Diane justifies her homesteading practices as altruistic, despite drawing on the more self-serving preparation account. I call attention to the way that people merged self-oriented and other-oriented motives because the compliance and dependence versions of the opting out frame could each be adopted by those who understood their efforts to benefit others. While at first blush it might appear that the compliance account would be framed as other-oriented and the dependence account as self-focused, the reality was not this simple. Some sought to justify both logics as altruistic, and many, even the majority, at some point in the interview drew on both the reducing compliance and reducing dependence versions of the opting out frames.

To summarize, this version of the opting out frame explained homesteading as a way to use self-sufficiency to reduce dependence on dysfunctional institutions and systems, with the goal of restoring the ability to direct own's own life; increasing security for oneself, one's family, and one's community; and preparing for potential disasters.

### *Restoration of Independence*

Accounts that rely on opting out as an effort to reduce dependence restore a sense of independence through providing participants a way to explain their lives as located within their own power and control, strengthening their sense of security in an insecure world, and instilling a sense of agency when they feel that life is being determined for them. Specifically, the opting out frame provides participants a way to cast the stories of their lives in agentic terms, and the notion of "preparation" gives them a way to explain that they are doing something to protect themselves against the problems about which they were concerned. If they felt that institutional change was futile and thus systemic issues were unlikely to improve, they could at least construct a buffer for themselves against the consequences of these problems. Lastly, the opting out logic

enabled participants to frame their lives as alternative, unconventional lives in which they disengaged from mainstream cultures and systems.

First, the opting out frame provided participants a way to explain their lives as within their own control rather than the hands of untrustworthy others. This account allows participants to *feel* as though they determine their own lives, despite their beliefs that the world is crumbling around them. Interviewees who primarily drew on independent vocabularies of motive also used the language of “empowerment” to discuss homesteading. Many participants spoke of homesteading as a strategy to “take back” power that had been ceded to others, situating life’s decisions within one’s own command. As David tells me,

You and I have a right to privacy. You and I have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We have our constitutional rights. And homesteading is my way of doing it the right way. Running my life is my control, my freedom, my way of life that has no intervention from big business or the government.

Relatedly, Lem explains self-sufficiency in the following way:

And so I think that like homesteading is a way of, of taking some of that back. Or at least putting the brakes on some of that and saying ... it's sort of like if you're making a wrong decision at least it's your own decision. Um, it feels like a lot of decisions that are being made now to speak like really generally, broadly, are being made for us and not by us. And so this is kind of a way of stepping in and just trying to make mistakes that at least make them, make our own mistakes. [Laughs] And then when the mistakes are made they are usually, if the community is resilient ... it can withstand the mistake. And so they're not as big, they're not oil spills in the gulf. Um, there's sort of a margin of error that's allowed because the scale is smaller.

In Lem’s perspective, homesteading is a way to restore decision-making power to small communities, and in so doing reduce the likelihood that the community will be impacted by a major disaster.

Over and over again, interviewees used the language of “control” to discuss their homesteading. Murray tells me that “you’re gaining more control through homesteading”; Hannah tells me that when she grows her own tomatoes, “I have just controlled that piece of my

health environment;" Emily tells me that she likes the "sense of control" of "directing things from step one to end." When I ask Anna what she enjoys about being able to do something herself, she responds,

Well it means that I'm self-sufficient in some regard. It means that I don't, that I have the knowledge and I have the ability, and that means that I have the power. So I'm not giving that power away to somebody else. (Jordan: Can you give me an example?) Well, like, ok, so this table. I built this table when we moved into this house. So I got the wood, I know where the wood came from, it came from a barn in [a local town]. So I got the wood. I know how the table was made, because I made it. I know how I finished the table. I know the money that I spent on the table and I know where that money went. So I got to control like the entire aspect of the creation of this table. So like with my vegetables, I know the soil that they were grown in because I have built up that soil, I know the chemical, I know what chemicals were not used.

This framing of self-sufficiency as control –over what goes into my food, my body, my family's bodies, over where my money goes – reveals a key way in which homesteading restores one's sense of independence.

The more specific aspect of control that many participants emphasized was that of *security* – that they felt homesteading restored their confidence in the safety and the stability of their livelihoods. Tammy, homesteading to prepare for the second coming of Christ, in the following conjectures on why the Prepping movement is growing, telling me,

I think between the extreme political rift in our country, there's unease on both sides. And no matter what your political beliefs are, people aren't comfortable about what's going on and what the other side feels. You add to that major natural disasters that have happened and how things get messed up and [were] not handled right. Maybe it's because the news likes to nag on every little bad thing that happens and blow it out of proportion – or things are just getting worse. But, I think people are just uncomfortable and scared with how things are going in the world.

*And being able to defend yourself or feel like you can defend yourself gives that sense of control back.* People like to feel in control of themselves and their world. And there's an extreme lack of that sense of security in our world today. So, being a Homesteader or being a Prepper gives that sense of empowerment – of feeling, ok, no matter what happens I'll be alright. I think that's probably at

the core of a lot of what we see in the increase of prepping and homesteading is just *the need to be in control of one's life and one's destiny*.

Tina's analysis, which rang true throughout my interviews, is that homesteading gives people a way to understand their lives and futures as self-determined. As I argue throughout this dissertation, this *account* of homesteading was much more important to restoring an emotional sense of security than was their actual ability to live self-sufficiently. David, for example, had not actually yet begun to practice homesteading. He researched activities and had various plans, but primarily engaged in thinking about homesteading. Yet, see how he explains his homesteading as a way for him to stay safe in the event of inevitable demise of society.

I said "Well, there's no solution that I can do for the country." So the solution ended up becoming a solution for myself ... You know, if you can't fix the country, at least fix yourself. You can't fix the world, you can fix... at least fix yourself. I'm just going on a rant because, like I said, this country is kinda going downhill. I can't stop it, but at least I'll be able to protect MYself.

The opting out frame restored to David his sense of control and security, regardless of his ability to actually live on his own in the event of some disaster.

The language of security as survival in the event of disaster was most prevalent among those who identified as Preppers, but a very wide range of participants discussed homesteading as increasing their security more broadly. Hannah, for example, tells me that she homesteads in part to "provide for myself and be independent" because she has "enough knowledge and land to be able to provide for ourselves, should something happen." Similarly, Randy, who had experienced bouts of unemployment during the recession, tells me that his family would like to "maintain a certain level of self-sustainability" because

It's quite honestly a little bit more secure for us. We don't have to worry about anybody losing jobs, we don't have to worry about anybody, you know, missing whatever payment, getting sick, health issues. So I know that we can grow food for us and not only are we going to be healthier as a result of it, but we'll be more sustainable economically, financially, and emotionally.

Participants thus felt like opting out of unpredictable systems allowed one to lead a more secure life – both currently and in the future.

This account also restores agency to the narratives of their lives – they are *choosing* to leave the system, despite the cultural and structural constraints that effectively left some of them with no choice but to opt out. In chapter three, I brought up the stories of several participants that claimed that life changes – particularly leaving jobs or careers – were independently chosen choices, despite evidence to the contrary. Many of these same participants – Blake, who left a job as a house flipper and home in another state after losing a substantial amount of money during the housing crisis; Christine, who left a Pharmaceutical job and described a host of circumstances that led to that transition; Rick, who left his corporate life and in his story of how that came to be explained his dissatisfaction and lack of success in this position; and Randy, who mentioned bouts of unemployment and layoffs before his decision to become a goat farmer – all cast these transitions as intentional efforts to opt out of: the grid (Blake), unethical career paths (Christine and Rick), and conventional American culture (Rick and Randy). The opting out account enabled participants to add a layer of meaning and *agency* to changes in their lives that did not, by their own account, seem to be entirely situated within their control.

Moreover, the language and notion of “preparation” provides participants a way to be actively engaged toward a productive end, while continuing to be resigned to system failure. Participants who invoke the prepper account recast the goal – individual or collective – from social change to survival or persistence. Doing so grants participants the ability to speak of their actions as empowered, to avoid discussions of fear or pessimism, and to have the ability to discuss their progress and achievements – while allowing them, even requiring them, to feel that the system will fail or worsen. For example, Neal ran for mayor of a small town on a



homesteading platform – not because he thought he could affect large-scale *change*, but because he wanted to help immunize and protect his community from what he saw as inevitable economic collapse. Consider the way he discusses his mayoral platform.

Um, right now we buy our water from [a much larger city in the area]. We have given up our ability [as a town] to manufacture water for our community in favor of the convenience of having [a bigger city] do it. Our water comes from [a local lake] which is ranked by the EPA as one of the 50 most polluted lakes in the United States. There's a tremendous amount of chemicals that have to be added to that water to make it potable. My idea was, once again, in the event of economic collapse, how do those chemicals get into that water? They come in by transfer truck right, tanker truck? What if gas is running 9, 10, 12 dollars a gallon at that particular point. What happens to the cost of water? It goes through the roof. Why don't we plan for that and put 15 wells in strategic places around town? Cover it with a warehouse with a solar powered pump, have a town employee go out there quarterly to check the electrolyte levels in the batteries and then lock 'em up and leave 'em alone until we need em!?

Here, the idea of preparation through opting out of more interconnected systems gave him a charge or purpose, granting him an agentic pathway while simultaneously accepting his inability to change the inevitable. In the previous chapter, I discussed how participants told me that failure or catastrophe was a necessary step toward positive change, allowing them to claim optimism in the face of very negative perspectives. Here, I discuss those participants who do not see failure as part of a more hopeful future, but rather take for granted that failure will destroy the majority of the population; instead, they retain hope in their ability to save themselves, their families, or their communities.

Lastly, ideologies surrounding homesteading are also used to restore one's sense of nonconformity, as participants explain homesteading as a way to disengage from the mainstream and participate in alternative systems. Some of this is evident in the way that participants describe homesteaders as, for example,

maybe a little bit of counterculture, we're rebellious (Lindsey)

I've seen like cool pictures of hipsters, you know, weaving their own cloth or something and I'm like 'Yeah!' [laughs] 'That sounds cool!' (Emily)

I think I'm like a tiny little crazy lady who lives on like [laughs] a large corner lot in downtown.... (Anna)

This sense of homesteading as an unconventional, “alternative” life was also evident in the way they described their homesteading activities. For example, Rick describes his homesteading:

I was trying to set an example of how we ought to be living as a culture ... my peers appreciated me... they could see I was an interesting cat, who's creative and doing their own thing... but my parents [breathes deeply] – and I would say the larger culture of people that are heavily invested in the dominant paradigm – they would look upon my life and they'd go "Pphh, like granola eating hippy, solar powered dude off in the woods" like, "please," you know?

In this, Rick situates his lifestyle as clearly outside of the norm, something appreciated by open-minded, free-spirited people, but rejected by those who buy in to mainstream culture. Similarly, Randy tells me that “the local food concept, the sustainable agriculture concept – those are outgrowths of the very basic – I'm tired of doing what I'm doing, I'm tired of being a part of this consumer culture, so let's try something different.” By understanding homesteading as alternative – “something different” – by engaging in homesteading participants restored their ability to think of themselves as nonconformists.

In short, accounts using the opting out frame enabled participants to explain that they were in control, that their lives were secure, that they determined their own lives, and that they made their own decisions and constructed their own worldviews – despite, on some level, feeling that they were not in control of their own lives and decisions. Regardless, they had the power to claim that they were independent people.

### **Explaining Ideological Structuring**

In the last section, I showed how the *content* of ideological accounts play a role in restoring vocabularies of motive. In the following, I build on that argument to claim that

participants seek out, learn, use, and incorporate into their identity these ideological accounts to help them to resolve an identity strain. I present evidence to show that the restoration of vocabularies of motive is not only an outcome of movement participation, but a key reason that participants come to explain their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action. This argument builds on the foundation groundwork already laid in this dissertation that identity strains and ideological accounts varied together – the more ideologically participants accounted for their lifestyles, the more likely they were to express thoughts and emotions that contradicted their sense of identity.

To make the case that participants adopted ideological accounts in an effort to resolve identity strains, I analyze the characteristics and narratives that differed between interviews in which participants expressed strong ideological accounts and those that expressed weak ideological accounts<sup>10</sup>. The more articulate, coherent, elaborated, and salient the participants' ideological account, the more likely they were to have self-recruited into the movement after having read about it online or in books, suggesting that these individuals were more likely to have been seeking the lifestyle and that they were primarily drawn to its accompanying ideas and discourse rather than strictly its component behaviors. Next, I argue that people take the time to *learn and articulate* coherent ideological accounts for their lifestyles when such accounts help them to rationalize, minimize, or transform problematic outlooks and emotions. Lastly, participants with identity strains were not only more likely to use ideologies more frequently in interviews, but to incorporate ideologies into their identities; these participants were most likely

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<sup>10</sup> I'd like to call attention to the fact that these poles – the ideologically-driven participant vs. the non-ideological participant and the accompanying pathways I discuss – are idealized for the purpose of analysis. For most participants, ideological structuring was a matter of degree; real interviewees fit somewhere along a graduated spectrum rather than in neat categories. Moreover, in the following comparative analysis there were exceptions to every rule. Within the spectrum of ideological structuring, I analyzed what dimensions *tended* to occur together.

to imagine themselves as part of an ideological community of homesteaders with similar motives. In short, participants take the time to find, learn, offer, and incorporate into their identity ideological accounts for their lifestyles when doing so performs identity work for them.

### ***Self-Recruitment vs. Social Networks***

In the following, I examine the patterned differences in how those with strong and weak ideological accounts described how they came to adopt homesteading practices – and what these pathways reveal about how participants learned the ideological accounts associated with the lifestyle. I show that the weaker the participant's ideological account, the more likely they were to know others participating in the lifestyle before adopting it and to informally, organically, unintentionally learn ideological accounts of the lifestyle through their social networks and the cultures in which they were embedded. In contrast, the stronger the ideological account, the more likely participants were to self-recruit into the movement, learning about the lifestyle and its reading coherently articulated ideologies through websites, books, or other forms of media. For those with identity strains, the discourse of the movement drew them in – the surrounding ideas and narratives of homesteading. In contrast, I argue that for those without identity strains, learning the ideas of the movement was secondary; they did not deliberately seek the homesteading lifestyle, but instead were indirectly recruited to it, drawn to the practices rather than ideologies of the movement.

For some interviewees, ideological accounts were background noise – cited casually rather than central to the way they framed their motivations; these interviewees also tended to be those who were embedded in communities in which these ideologies circulate in the culture. Moreover, they tended to start engaging in homesteading practices because they mimicked others in their networks; participants saw those around them participating in homesteading practices

and consequently came to see such behaviors as a part of their culture. JoAnn and Tom, for example, tell me that they started homesteading because it was just the “culture they grew up in.”

When I ask why they’re interested in self-sufficiency, JoAnn responds:

Well I don't know. I think it's just the way, I, you know, I hate to say it because it's gonna sound funny but really it was the culture we grew up in in the 70s. And this was the kind of the thing that – cause North Carolina at that time growing up was a lot more rural. ... I mean, I had relatives that lived in the country that were rural. My father grew up on a farm. And it's just always been, you know, it's just always been there.

In this quote, JoAnn tells me that she was just a part of a social network where it was common to engage in homesteading practices, and so she followed suit. Likewise, Isabel attributes her interest in homesteading practices to culture, telling me that what got her “into it” was “I think the environment [of this town] maybe a little bit too. Just that everybody is so into local food.” For these participants, adopting homesteading was less a deliberate choice than it was following the lead of those around them.

Participants who learned the ideologies of homesteading through social osmosis – absorbing norms and ideas through social circumstance or proximity – tended to leave ideological accounts unlaborated. I paid close analytical attention to patterned absences in interviews, or what I informally came to think of as “well, duh” responses; by this, I mean the rationales, ideas, and connections that were left unsaid because interviewees, like fish in water, considered them so obvious that they were not worth bringing to my attention. These responses, I argue, reveal to what extent one draws on particular accounts reflexively because one is a part of cultures in which they circulate, rather than a more deliberate, critical, self-conscious learning of the account. In interviews, there were often things that people stated as obvious that I had to ask them to unpack, as for example why things will get bad before the second coming of Christ (Tammy), what a religious “mission” is (Debbie), or to what the “Paleo diet” or “Kombucha”

refer (Nathan and Mary, respectively). Some participants largely left unspoken, however, their very reasons for homesteading. Several mentioned problems with the food system or environment as a taken-for-granted aspect of why they homesteaded (e.g. Mary, Debbie, Thomas) but did not offer any more information unless prompted, and had some trouble unpacking this idea when I did prompt. As another example, some drew on the prepper language and logic, but did not elaborate why we needed to prepare or for what (Hannah, Diane). Some participants even metacognitively recognized that they were drawing on terms and ideas from their cultures in an automatic, involuntary sort of way. For example, see the way that Keith pokes fun of himself in the following for critiquing “the system” uncritically.

Kristin: Um, Yeah. I feel a conviction not to get caught up in, in an unhealthy system. It's one of my convictions.

Jordan: And what system would that be?

Kristin\*: Um, gosh, back to the food system--The agricultural system. Um [smacks lips].

Jordan: Can you tell me what it is unhealthy about the food system?

Keith: It's the system man. [All laugh] It's the system! [More laughter] You need an explanation?!

Here, Keith humorously acknowledges that they are part of a culture in which the flaws of “the system” need no explanation. These moments, exchanges, and absences revealed in subtle ways that some interviewees were surrounded by cultures in which these ideas were part of the repertoire, but did not craft these ideas into more elaborated lifestyle accounts, showing that they did not need to *use* these accounts for identity work.

Those interviewees who did not account for their homesteading using contentious ideologies were also a part of real (non-virtual), pre-existing social networks and communities in which others practice homesteading. Consequently, these interviewees were most likely to say

they had been brought to the lifestyle through social networks and their relationships to others. For example, Lem, who did explain his lifestyle ideologically as a manifestation of his theology, but did not often frame his motivations in contentious ways, was introduced to the lifestyle through becoming involved in religious networks in which such practices were common. In particular, he was introduced to what I came to think of as an “influential” – a person relatively well-known within certain circles for homesteading practices that actively seeks to encourage others to adopt the lifestyle. Lem became more interested in homesteading after someone “invited” him to come out to a faith-based community garden, and he met someone who was homesteading with his family through gardening and raising livestock, and doing so for theological reasons. This description of others influencing him to adopt certain practices contrasts with my more contentious interviewees, who, as I elaborate below, tended to discuss influential books or experiences rather than pre-existing relationships. Similarly, Evan describes becoming interested in hunting through his involvement at an archery range in high school; Debbie and Bill tell me they initially took up homesteading after Bill went on a mission trip to African and “met a lot of farmers” and “wanted to help them;” and Anna, Mary, and Isabel describe coming to be a part of communities interested in local food and farming through their college environments.

In contrast, I found that the most ideological participants claimed *not* to be a part of pre-existing networks prior to adopting homesteading practices in which they knew others that engaged in homesteading. In contrast to Haenfler et al.’s (2012) claim that “Participants in lifestyle movements often learn about the movement from friends or family” (10), I found that the most ideological participants asserted<sup>11</sup> that they knew no one who participated in

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note here that the data I collected for this dissertation was subjective narratives. This finding could be an artifact of interviewing a population that was highly individualistic and so did not *attribute* influence to

homesteading activities prior to beginning themselves, and consequently did not attribute any of their story of coming to the movement to being recruited or even exposed to the homesteading lifestyle through others they knew. For example, when I asked Tammy – who used homesteading to prep for the impending second coming of Christ, foreshadowed by problems in the political system and increasing conflict in the world – how many people she knew who engaged in homesteading when she first started, she responded “Personally? (Mnhmm.) Um, none really.”

I found that even after beginning homesteading practices, the majority of participants knew only a small handful of people who engaged in homesteading, and some knew no one. Many participants found it difficult to think of more than a few people to refer to me. For example, when I asked David at the end of our interview if he knew people that he could refer to the study, he simply replied, “I don’t know any Homesteaders.” Lastly, interviewees were almost always surprised when I told them that I planned to interview around 50 people, suggesting that their networks of homesteaders were rather small. When Robert asks me about the future of the study, he seemed surprised when I told him I would interview around 50. I responded that I thought this was attainable since I had found a meet-up group online that had over 1,000 members. When I mention this, he is taken aback, saying “Oh, wow!” and then follows up by confusedly asking, “There’s a lot of people, are you seeing there’s a lot of people doing this?” Similarly, when I tell Blake about the project, he responds, “It’s gonna be kind of tough finding all that many people I would think.” In general, the more ideologically participants accounted

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others in their network. Regardless, this is an important finding that revealed what participants found salient in their story; to them, the influence of books, the internet – and generally words and ideas – were more important in bringing them to the movement than knowing others around them that engaged in these behaviors.



for their lifestyle, the *less* likely they were to mention relationships, communities, people, or social networks in their interviews.

Moreover, while in more conventional, public activism organizations play a crucial role in recruiting people (Clemens and Minkoff 2004), participants rarely if ever mentioned formal organizations in their stories of how they came to engage in homesteading practices. In the vast majority of interviews, organizations were absent from the more organic part of the interview in which I let the interviewee lead the conversation and solely prompted them to elaborate based on things they had independently brought up. Toward the end of the interview, I would review my general topical guide and ask questions if themes had not arisen spontaneously during the interview; organizations were universally in this latter category, only appearing when I asked direct questions about organizational involvement at the end of the interview. When I asked if participants were involved in any organizations connected to their homesteading lifestyle, some, like Michelle and Nathan or Todd, simply responded “No,” some asked me what I meant, and some could not even think of examples of such organizations that they weren’t involved in (e.g. Isabel). Leah simply tells me, “I’m not like actively a part of anything I guess other than my life.”

The majority of the participants that could think of organizations – for example, meet-up groups devoted to organic gardening, livestock associations, organizations where they took sustainable living classes, or associations that teach Prepping skills – had trouble thinking of these organizations when I asked the question; their responses were characterized by long pauses, hesitations, and only partially remembered names of groups. Those who were engaged in organizations tended to be marginally attached to them; as Lynn tells me, “I’m trying to think of where else we have to send money,” suggesting that this is the extent of her involvement. The

vast majority of these organizations were online and participants' involvement in them included receiving emails or visiting websites, rather than any sort of face-to-face involvement or more in-depth commitment. To the extent that participants were involved in organizations, they were skill-based organizations that sought to teach how to engage in the specific practices of homesteading. Middlemiss (2011) makes the case that this is the strongest role for organizations within lifestyle movements – to provide the necessary know-how and resources for individuals to participate in the lifestyle. Consistent with this finding, participants occasionally had taken courses or workshops in how to make cheese, skin rabbits, forage for wild edibles, or make bread. Crucially, participants described joining these organizations *after* they became interested in the homesteading lifestyle, giving them no credit for recruiting them to the lifestyle.

To the extent that ideological participants had formed relationships with others who engaged in similar practices, or were involved in organizations, these connections were formed *post hoc* – participants forged them only after taking up homesteading practices. Participants told me time and again that they deliberately sought to fashion or join social networks after deciding to engage in the homesteading lifestyle, in an effort to meet like-minded individuals or to learn the skills of the lifestyle. This network construction was a deliberate, purposeful project. For example, Julia, for whom homesteading practices were inextricably tied to her identity as a homeschooler – and, moreover, “unschooler” – tells me, “So I went actively looking for the homeschooling community, and I found this group. And they were really difficult to find online, I’m the only person that’s ever found them.” Several joined online groups because, as Blake explains, they’re “a very good way if you don’t know anybody that doing it to get involved ... and you can learn from them.” Xander, who had started a regional Prepper group, told me that his main goal was to “get likeminded people together to be able to talk about things and to be

able to, you know, learn new skills.” Participants describes these networks as providing them a supportive, primarily online community in which homesteading skills are taught and learned. As Dean tells me, “Everybody needs help with things so it kind of becomes a community.” Lucky describes how this community intensified his commitment to the lifestyle and the extent to which he sought to incorporate homesteading practices into his life. Meeting others, he tells me, is a

positive feedback loop. That as I, as I started doing it I interacted with people who were doing it and then as I started interacting with people who were doing it, I kind of increased the amount that I was doing because I learned from them. And it just kind of, you know, keeps on spiraling that way.

Thus, while networks help to reaffirm commitment to the movement, they formed after one’s participation in homesteading rather than prior to it, playing more of a role in skill-building than in recruiting participants to the lifestyle initially.

Instead, when participants told their stories of how they came to engage in homesteading practices, they described it as a process of *self-recruitment* into the lifestyle after exposure to homesteading through *media* – for example, books, websites, blogs, podcasts, web forums, or YouTube videos. Haenfler et al. (2012) argue that “Much of the structure of LMs, including movement ideology and authority, tends to emerge from a diffuse discursive field rather than in the course of a highly organized campaign.” By *discursive field*, the authors mean a loose network of various forms of media in which a diverse group of people author the ideologies of the movement, advocate for why others should adopt it, and seek to educate others on the skills of the lifestyle. The majority of the most ideological participants in this study described discovering the homesteading lifestyle through reading about it online or in books, rather than through personal contacts or organizations. Some found these texts intentionally, in their process of seeking out alternative lifestyles and meanings in periods of distress or in their process of

“researching” the problems about which they were concerned. Others stumbled across the field unintentionally.

Regardless of whether participants sought out or stumbled upon these articles, books, or websites, they tended to describe learning the ideologies and skills of the homesteading movement through reading about it online or in books. First, participants attributed their exposure to the ideologies around the homesteading lifestyle, and awareness that there was a movement of people that engaged in and defined themselves by such practices, to media.

Tammy, for instance, told me that through starting to research organic gardening because she “wanted food that wasn't poison,” she came to “realize that there was this concept about Modern Homesteading. Um which is a whole different – it's more about self-reliance and independence.” Here, Tammy discovers through the internet the ideological account of homesteading as an effort to reduce dependence on systems. Similarly, John describes how he and his wife came to be inspired to only eat what they had produced, or of which they knew the source, through listening to a book on tape about dumpster diving.

After listening to it, we, that's when we absolutely decided we wouldn't eat anything that we didn't know. I can't remember the name of the book, but the substance of it was that the only thing you could really do that was ethical, and wouldn't support the ... food industry in this country was to dumpster dive.

Here, we see that a book introduced a lifestyle choice as the most “ethical” response to problems in the food system. While John and Lynn felt this lifestyle (dumpster diving) to have too many costs, the text convinced them they needed to change their own lifestyle to approximate it – that they would no longer “eat anything we didn't know.” Additionally, in discussing how they learned the skills of homesteading – how to garden, raise bees, nurse sick goats back to health, build a chicken coop – only a handful of participants brought up people, classes, conferences, or organizations. The vast majority learned homesteading through reading. As Hannah succinctly

tells me, “Most of what I know I read about in books.” Hannah was far from alone in this assertion; the majority of participants, when I asked them how they learned homesteading skills, mentioned media over people – particularly the internet.

In short, self-described pathways to homesteading practices show that participants with weak and strong ideological accounts learned these accounts in two different ways. Those with weak accounts learned these ideas through a process of social osmosis – being a part of communities and cultures in which people engaged in homesteading and in which ideas around homesteading were part of the cultural vocabulary. In contrast, those participants who experience identity strain learned the ideological accounts through individually finding and reading about them, showing that they were on some level seeking these ideas and that they were interested enough in such ideas to take the time to learn them through self-directed research.

### ***Ideological Structuring and Identity Work***

In the previous section, I looked at how ideological accounts were learned; in this section, I examine how ideological accounts were *invoked* in interviews – specifically, to what extent accounts were salient, elaborated, and coherently articulated – and what this ideological structuring revealed about the forms of identity work accomplished through accounts. I argue that those with weakly expressed ideological accounts use homesteading *practices* as a form of identity work, but not homesteading *accounts*. I argue that more optimistic, non-ideological interviewees came to adopt the lifestyle because their cultures and social networks looked favorably upon homesteading practices and that they adopting these practices in an effort to affirm, rather than restore, aspects of their personal identity. While these participants still used homesteading practices to signal their conscientiousness and independence, they did not need to cope with inefficacy and pessimism through engaging with ideological accounts. I argue that

ideologies come to the forefront when one has to articulate them to oneself and others to resolve, or explain away, a feeling or belief one holds that is perceived as problematic. In these situations, ideological accounts do more identity work for the individual and require conscious articulation and elaboration. If ideological accounts are something one doesn't *need* to explain to oneself or to others to cope with an identity strain, these accounts fade into the background; they may be referenced occasionally but are not a primary explanation for one's lifestyle.

In the following analysis, I turn to those interviews in which ideological accounts were noticeably absent or weakly expressed – meaning components of ideologies were mentioned in passing, but left unelaborated, were not part of more coherent accounts, or were not salient within interviews. By examining what was different about those interviews in which people primarily explained their homesteading activities non-ideologically, with ideologies that were not contentious, or that minimally drew on ideologies, I hope to illuminate those who use strong ideological accounts through contrast. Here, I show that those without identity strains use practices, rather than ideological accounts, as a form of identity work, and do not need to articulate the accounts to themselves or others to help make sense of a problematic perspective.

While the vast majority of participants explained their homesteading using elements of the ideological accounts elaborated earlier, some participants – those you have heard little about in the pages of this dissertation thus far – drew on non-ideological accounts - they homesteaded for pleasure, because they liked to work with their hands and be outside, because it was fun to nurture something, it brought them joy, made them eat more vegetables or helped them to save money. When, for example, I ask JoAnn and Tom why they are taking up more and more homesteading practices over time, they respond,

Tom: Oh gosh, I don't know. (JoAnn: I don't know). Just interest.

JoAnn: We just decided to, I guess [laughs, and so does Tom.]

Tom: Thought it was a neat idea, I don't ...

While the vast majority of participants brought up such non-ideological reasons at some point in the interview, the emphasis on them varied tremendously. Most participants highlighted the more ideological, grievance-oriented accounts, framing their homesteading as a response to perceived social and environmental problems; then, they mentioned at some point that they enjoyed working in the sun, or another non-ideological account. For a handful, however, these non-ideological reasons were the primary account – homesteading was fun and they liked it. For these interviewees, homesteading is best understood as a hobby rather than participation in a lifestyle movement.

These participants were also much more likely to offer what I coded as the “no account” account; they had trouble articulating why they did what they did in a clear or coherent way, using phrases like “I don’t know,” “I’m not sure,” or “Just Cause.” They told me they’d just always done it, or that they weren’t sure why they did it. These participants were more likely to hesitate or pause, speak slowly, and use a lot of “ums,” as if they were thinking through their responses as they gave them. For example, when Mary mentions self-sufficiency, I ask her why that is important to her, and she responds,

Um, it's kind of like what I was saying about an agricultural system. Like what comes in, what goes out. Um, and not having to depend on too many outside forces to sustain you. So, like - what was the question again? What [laughs] (Jordan: Why you want to be self-sufficient.) Um, I think because I can be if I wanted to be and if I tried. Um [pause] so why not try? I just think it [pause] I don't know. That's a hard one. Why be self-sufficient? [Says the following in a high-pitched voice, raising her voice at the end. Shrugs her shoulders and makes a silly face, like one of mock resignation or confusion.] Just cause! [Jordan laughs.] Cause I, it, you just don't really, I don't want to depend on other people or other things... But, being able to take the raw product and the raw ingredient and turn it and transform it into something that you can use and eat and um. I think that's kind of important, is starting with the raw.

Mary thinks through her answer as she's talking and is unsure about her response. She forgets the question, acknowledges that she hasn't thought through this question ("Just cause!") and concludes by circuitously telling me that self-sufficiency is "important." This is a very different sort of response than many of my other interviewees, to whom self-sufficiency is a key component of their ideologies and their response to government or corporate intervention. Mary responds similarly to other questions in which I call on her to "account" for her homesteading. When, for example, she tells me she likes the Farmer's Market because she can ask questions about the food's origins, she gives me a few examples and then says, "And these aren't questions that I need to know, but it's just cool to know. It's just nice to know. And if you can ask them, why not know the answer to them, you know?" Again, this is a very different response in comparison to interviewees in which knowing the source of their products grants them control over ensuring that they are involved in ethical, human production systems. Mary is a great example of an interviewee who draws on components of ideological accounts – self-sufficiency, knowing the source – but does so in a partial, unelaborated, and incoherently articulated way. I argue that this "no account" account shows that these participants rarely had the need to explain these ideas to themselves or others.

In many other interviews, participants drew on fragments of ideologies – partial, incomplete, or inconsistent elements of larger narratives – in their explanation for homesteading. They were on some level familiar with the ideological accounts, but told me they were not important to them, mentioned them rarely in comparison to non-ideological accounts, or knew commonly touted refrains or ideas from the ideological accounts, but when probed it was apparent that they had not considered these ideas more in-depth. Emily, for example, briefly references larger issues, telling me,



Um, yeah and *of course you know* I'm *obviously* aware of broadly discourses about, um, homesteading as, *you know*, sustainable practice and, um, *you know* these larger kind of concerns about where, um, you know, mass mar – not mass marketing --mass produced food comes from. And, *you know, all of this stuff*, I'm *obviously* concerned about that..."

Emily speaks about these issues as though they are common knowledge, but does not seem particularly passionate about or interested in expanding on these issues in depth. Later, she tells me that the “issues” are “in the back of my head ... They’re still there, but they weren’t like, you know, I didn’t like watch a chicken documentary and then go like ‘We have to get chickens!’ [laughs].” Similarly, when Anna brings up issues she sees with the agricultural system, and I ask her if she thinks the issues are getting better or worse, she responds “And that, yeah, I don’t, I think maybe. Maybe it’s gonna get better. Um, but that’s not why I grow things.” Later, when I list off some terms that others had told me they identify with and ask her if she does, she responds, “Maybe, maybe the urban food movement. But I think it’s, I think I keep coming back to this idea that ... I don’t feel like I’m part of a movement. I think I’m just doing what feels good.” Anna was an interesting case because, due to her college experience in which she majored in “Community Health and Food Studies,” she could elaborate in detail issues with the food system as well as some things she thought could address these issues. Despite having this in-depth knowledge, she does not draw on it in how she *accounts* for her homesteading – it is not, as she tells me, why she grows things.

In these cases, homesteading *practices* were still connected to identity, an extension of traits of conscientiousness and independence. However, the ideological account of homesteading receded into the cultural background – something interviewees may be aware of, but rarely considered or referenced. Ideological accounts were less important to participants’ explanation of their motives than the general understanding that homesteading behaviors signaled to others in their community that they were intentional, free-thinking people. For these

interviewees, it was apparent that homesteading was valued positively in their communities; they would tell me things like homesteading, agriculture, or farming was “cool”:

I'm sure I've seen like cool pictures of like hipsters on like, you know, um, weaving their own cloth or something and I'm like "Yeah!" [Laughs] "That sounds cool!" (Emily).

[The farm tour was] “a cool deal.” ... “It's cool to see food growing” ... [Some local African-American farmer that I know are “cool and they have really good greens.” (Isabel).

This language that revealed their positive evaluation of homesteading practices, showing that they were part of cultures that generally saw such practices as a good thing – yet without need for elaborated accounts as to specifically why such practices were good.

These interviewees were still embedded in cultures in which conscientiousness and independence are valued, and they saw homesteading practices as amplifying these traits; such activities were still a form of identity work for these interviewees. For example, see the way that Bob explains his adoption of gardening as an unthinking commitment (at least initially) that simply “fit” his identity as part of the alternative, leftist crowd. When he mentions the term “organic” and I ask him why that’s important to him, he says,

Ah, mmmmm, that's a real good question. When I was first exposed to the idea, this friend of mine ... he introduced me a lot of things. And he and his girlfriend were starting this organic garden ... And that was an unfamiliar term to me. But he e --you know, so I was like “Oh no chemicals!” And I'm like "Oh sounds good!" [Jordan laughs] You know? Seems like it made sense.

... And so partly it was the appeal that it's not the mainstream way to do it. It was alternative. You know, so it was more feeling like I – you know, ever since I'd been politically aware I'd felt like I was left of center and organic fit that. So it kind of fit. ... Um, so it was fitting in a cultural sense more than like I was worried I was poisoning myself or something...

In this exchange, Bob admits that initially he started participating in organic agriculture because it fit with and amplified his identity as an independent, nonconformist person. Thus, while homesteading still supported this vocabulary of motive, Bob had not had an experience in which

he felt that was losing his sense of independence; consequently, he did not need to elaborately, coherently justify to himself or others that he actually was independent when he did not feel to be so. Because he did not have an identity strain, he had little need for the ideological account.

In short, the ideological structuring of participants' accounts varied tremendously along an ideological continuum. While many expressed strong ideological accounts, as has been elaborated in depth throughout this chapter, some expressed non-ideological motivations for homesteading, others were unsure how to articulate their motivations, and many drew on fragments of ideologies they left unelaborated and did not develop into a coherent account. For these interviewees, they engaged in identity work through using homesteading practices to signal their conscientiousness and independence, but did not use ideological *accounts* as identity work. I argue that participants take the time to regularly invoke coherent, detailed ideological accounts when the accounts help them to rationalize or minimize problematic perspectives.

### ***Collective Identity***

Lastly, participants with strong ideological accounts were most likely to primarily identify with being a part of a lifestyle movement; when participants spoke on behalf of a group or "we," they tended to refer to an imagined community which participated in homesteading *for similar ideological reasons*. In contrast, those with weak ideological accounts tended to describe themselves as part of communities of practice rather than ideas, or considered their homesteading to be an extension of other collective identities. This shows that not only did participants with identity strains invoke ideologies more often and more coherently in interviews, but that they *identified* more strongly with these ideologies. This bolsters my claim that participants with identity strains self-recruit into the homesteading lifestyle because they are drawn specifically to the ideologies, rather than the practices, of the movement.

As a reminder, a collective identity is a person's understanding that they are a member of a particular group, and this group membership meaningfully shapes their self-concept and actions (Owens et al. 2010; Polletta and Jasper 2001). One's sense of belonging to a group is ultimately subjective, rather than an automatic result of shared characteristics (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Melucci 1996). For example, one's income may be working class but the person doesn't feel connected to a working-class identity, or they may be of European heritage but feel connected to a Chicano identity. The subjective nature of collective identities means that such identities can be more or less salient for individuals (Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker et al. 2000), and that a person can feel partially connected to, or feel conflicted about, their collective identities (Robnett 2005; Holland 2003; Crowley 2008). Lastly, while collective identities are often abstracted and idealized in scholarly articles as coherent, strategically built groups, in practice collective movement identities are both unstrategic and constantly in flux, the emergent product of multiple and conflicting processes that occur in many sites and in the context of interaction among many groups (Holland 2008).

In short, determining the collective identities of participants is rarely a clear-cut, categorical analysis, but rather a consideration of the complex, often incomplete, and inconsistent ways that participants identify with groups. Ascertaining the collective identity of participants in this study was especially challenging. Because homesteading is a particularly individualized movement in which participants rarely directly engage with one another, many did not have a strong sense of themselves as part of a specific, named, bounded group; they had a much looser conception of an imagined community. Moreover, because the organization and structure of the movement emerges from a multi-sited, diffuse network of books and articles, blogs and podcasts, memoirs, how-to manuals and YouTube videos, the creation of a collective

identity is likely even less coherent than in a more organized form of movement. Additionally, as I discussed in chapter three, many homesteaders use independent vocabularies of motive and tend to hesitate from classifying themselves in any fashion – thinking of themselves as unconventional, nonconformist mavericks – which extended to the way they discussed their homesteading practices. For example, consider the way participants respond when I ask them what makes someone a homesteader:

Um, maybe someone who [laughs] is uncomfortable with being labeled a homesteader. [Laughs] Because I don't know they're suspicious of such categories (*Lem*).

I feel like labels and words kind of can like easily divide people and like separate people. And so like when people ask me what I do, I'm usually like fairly vague (*Leah*).

I don't really care what people call themselves [Laughs] (*Dean*).

I believe that because of these reasons, most interviewees, with some notable exceptions, did not use many *labels*; they tended not to strongly assert “I am an X.” Regardless of this hesitancy to adopt and use labels, most participants *did* think of themselves as belonging to a particular group, or multiple groups. This was evidenced in subtler ways through the way they spoke of themselves as part of a “we,” the types of people they imagined themselves to be in conversation with, or conversely to be in opposition to (Buechler 1990), and the types of shared ideas and terminologies they invoked (Gamson 1992). While all interviewees identified with larger groups – as do all humans – the extent to which they thought of their homesteading practices as part of a more collective project varied in ways I discuss below.

Interviewees who adopted homesteading practices without strong ideological motivations were most likely to invoke collective identities of practice, or to see homesteading as an extension of a collective identity around the pre-existing cultures in which they were embedded. By collective identities of practice, I mean that shared identities were grounded in practice (the

lifestyle) rather than ideas (ideological commitments expressed through the lifestyle). For example, these participants talked about their identities and communities in terms of “gardener” (Diane, Anna), “hunter” (Evan), “farmer” (Thomas), or “homesteader” (JoAnn and Tom, Dan), and with these terms signified an identity around shared behaviors or hobbies, but not necessarily ideological commitments. For instance, Dan tells me,

But I would never call it, you know, homesteading. I would just call it [pause] whatever it was. You know, we're going to do some canning or we're going to do some whatever. We didn't really think of ourselves as homesteaders.

These participants were also most likely to include in their imagined communities all those who engage in similar practices, regardless of their motivation, whereas more contentiously ideological participants tended to identify only with those with similar ideologies. For example, when I ask Emily if her conception of homesteader entailed people that are “doing it for some sort of reason,” she responds,

I don't think so. I mean if--or I think anyone's going to be doing it for a reason, right? But it might be that that reason is enjoyment, it might be that it's the taste of fresh eggs. Uh, it could be any of things right... it might not even have to be articulated really to themselves to, I think it's still cool. Yeah.

Here, it is evident that Emily, like a handful of other participants, uses practices rather than ideas as the primary criterion for who she imagines as part of her community.

Those interviewees who accounted for their homesteading practices as coming from pre-existing networks and cultures tended to see homesteading as an extension of those pre-existing identities. For example, some interviewees saw their homesteading as an extension of their environmental commitments, their hippie/countercultural status, or their interest in “foodie” culture. For all of these participants, homesteading was a part of how they understood these identities, but their imagined communities were not centered on homesteading practices or the ideological commitments associated with such practices. For example, I ask Anna to explain

who she includes in the “community around food” she had mentioned by offering her some examples of people I had interviewed. When I explain a prepper, she responds,

Anna: Yeah that, that is not my community. (Jordan: Ok.) [Laughs] I think a lot of that is like, I made a very conscious decision to live in a city and live in an urban environment... I live here because I want to be connected to other people.

Jordan: So what about a small-time farmer who lives half an hour out of town and sells at the farmer's market?

Anna: I would say that would be like the boundary.

Jordan: What about people who like really don't produce any of their own things ... but they purchase things at a farmer's market.

Anna: Not my community. So you're probably like "Who's in your community?" [Laughs]

Jordan: So somebody who is interested in some of the kinds of practices that you do – let's just say somebody who has like a backyard garden and cans occasionally?

Anna: Sure. I mean I also kind of view it like I have like different communities that like kind of overlap. So I feel like I have my gay community in [this town]. I have like my community of people who also garden who I can reach out for. I have my farmer's market community. Um, and some of those overlap in different ways. I have this neighborhood community.

Anna's sense of community, while it may overlap with the homesteading lifestyle she has chosen, is not specifically centered on the lifestyle. This rang true for various others who understood the homesteading lifestyle as a dimension of other identities. In general, those whose collective identities did not make central the homesteading lifestyle also provided weakly ideological accounts for their homesteading lifestyle.

In contrast, those participants who accounted for their lifestyle most ideologically, and accordingly those with the strongest identity strains, were also most likely to adopt a lifestyle movement collective identity. By this, I mean that they tended to see themselves as part of an imagined community of people that used homesteading practices to express particular ideologies

or respond to particular social or environmental problems. These collective identities were movement identities in that they entailed a shared goal and normative commitments (Holland 2008) and were identities constructed through the movement rather than pre-existing collective identities (Jasper 1997; Roscigno and Danaher 2001). They were communities of ideological *intention*, not just practice.

Homesteading was an umbrella term for a host of related movements that used homesteading practices toward particular ends. To the extent that homesteading was an overarching movement identity, cohesion was built around a shared prognostic rather than diagnostic frame, or ideas around how to address social or environmental problems rather than consensus on the problem (Benford and Snow 2000). Whereas many movement identities are grounded in shared ideas (e.g. a feminist is a person who believes x) or ascribed characteristics, movement identities can also form around shared behaviors or ways of operating (e.g. A homesteader is a person who does x), including tactical tastes or organizational forms (Cherry et al. 2011; Clemens 1997). This master or overarching homesteading identity brought together people with incredibly diverse motives. Dan, who founded a homesteading meet-up group, describes to me the first class that he hosted as,

... we had preppers, and we had Mormons, cause the Latter-Day Saints have to have a year's supply of food as part of that. And so extremely conservative. And then we had the Preppers that were there. Then we had the people that wanted to, that thought that we shouldn't eat any meat or eat plants if we can. And just we should have zero footprint on the earth. And so extremely liberal on their viewpoints. And these people were all in the same kitchen, you know, cooking together ...

Several other interviewees commented on how skill-building workshops could bring together people from fantastically different backgrounds ascribing to different ideologies. Interestingly, those that I interviewed who led organizations – Dan, as well as Xander, who formed a Prepper group – actually disallowed political discussions or conversations about ideological motives,



precisely because they felt the diversity of the group would cause these discussions to devolve into heated arguments. Dan tells me that his group was not going to “be political, or religious ... It only going to be about the practices of homesteading” and that he actively “shut down” any more ideological discussions or messages. Similar, Xander tells me that he has two rules for his Prepper group: “No religion. No politics.” He explains to me that these are “two hot button subjects ... that create friction and tear groups apart. I look at it like this. You’re coming to network, you’re coming to learn, you’re not coming to sit and bat for hours on who’s screwing the country more.” Thus, some participants became a part of real, non-virtual communities of practice connected through a homesteading identity – connections they made, as a reminder, *after* committing to the homesteading lifestyle.

Yet this broader identity around homesteading as the *prognosis* for various problems subsumed multiple lifestyle movement collective identities that agreed on the *diagnosis* of the problem. Individuals tended to identify primarily with the more specific identities that converge and overlap with homesteading; this is evident in the way participants in the study identify, as has been introduced throughout the pages of this dissertation: for example, urban homesteader (e.g. Neal), off-grid (e.g. Blake, Rick), Prepper (e.g. David, Xander, Isaac), eco-homesteading (e.g. Natalie), farmsteading (e.g. Christine), primitive skills (e.g. Lucky), and homeschooling or unschooling (e.g. Julia, Dean and Lindsey). Ideological participants expressed their dominant collective identities as both *ideological* and *imagined* communities – considering themselves to be a part of a larger group of people that use homesteading as a tool for particular ends due to particular ideological commitments. When I ask participants about how they define homesteader, their responses reveal that their main criteria of who they consider to be one of

“us” includes people with particular *intentions* rather than practices. For example, Neal and Rick define homesteader as:

[someone] who has a desire to, in some form or fashion, wean themselves from the current system. And that could be something as simple as maintaining a small vegetable garden and a coop full of chickens. That qualifies as a homesteader to me (*Neal*).

Someone that's seeking to live independently from what others are dependent on (*Rick*).

In this, Neal and Rick define homesteader as someone seeking to opt out of systems to reduce dependence – an ideological framing – as well as specifically note that their main criteria is intent rather than practice by noting that this includes people that have the “desire” to or are “seeking” to reduce dependence. Similarly, Xander tells me that to qualify to be a Prepper – his primarily collective identity – some need to have “*interest in or expertise in being self-reliant.*”

Many participants revealed in subtler, more indirect ways that who they considered as part of their group included those with similar ideological motivations rather than practices. For several, this was evident by who they did *not* include as one of “us.” When I described participants coming to homesteading for different ideological reasons, these participants told me that individuals with different motivations were not part of the same trend or movement. Xander tells me that environmentalists are not part of his Prepping community, even if they are engaged in the same lifestyle practices. Many, many participants tell me that Preppers are not part of their communities, even if when I asked the question I was careful to point out that they engaged in similar behaviors. Lindsey for example tells me Prepping is “distinctly different” because “you’re so focused on fear that you’re not doing it necessarily to improve the world, you’re doing it for your own benefit,” clearly defining her community as those who homestead in an effort to benefit society. Similarly, Julia tells me that she doesn’t identify with Preppers because

“there is a really kind of dark, isolationist vibe coming out of that that I’m not down with.” She explains,

There's kind of like two camps. Sustainable people kind of seem to believe that citizens are good and we can work together, and Preppers seem to believe that citizens are criminal, apt to become criminal at the drop of a hat and you can't expect to cooperate with people.

In this quote, Julia aligns herself with those she believes shared similar worldviews – altruistic, other-oriented perspectives – and distances herself from what she understands to be the mistaken perspectives of Preppers. Crucially, she defines who is in and out of her community by ideas and perspectives, not practices. Lastly, sometimes participants would define people as part of their communities if they had similar goals or intentions, but didn’t actually engage in the same practices. For example, Carla tells me that her big criteria is how people “feed themselves,” in which she includes people that seek to grow their own food, but also those who buy locally-grown, ethically sourced food. Again, this reveals that ideologies are more important to her than practices. Lastly, the majority of participants tell me that they never discuss or would discuss their motivations with others because they simply assume that everyone does it for the same reasons they do, showing that they imagine themselves to be a part of ideologically uniform communities rather than communities with diverse motivations.

These imagined communities strengthened ideological accounts because participants felt accountable to imagined others and consequently continually evaluated their lifestyles against the perceived judgment of others – specifically, of how well they authentically lived out the ideology. They thus undertook the most personal identity work to understand and justify their actions according to the ideological account, posturing themselves in reference to imagined others by evaluating (and defending themselves against evaluation from) others’ commitment to

and authenticity according to the ideology. For example, Rick positions himself as more motivationally pure, and more committed to environmentalist ideologies than others:

I've done literally everything under the sun, ok, that you can do. I mean I've built my own biodiesel factory. I built the first straw bale house, solar powered, on and on and on and on. Green store. I built a whole construction company around rescuing houses and keeping them out of the landfill. I mean I've done an amazing amount of shit, alright? ... I actually am in love with the earth mother, you know? ... So these people, the extent of their joy was to recycle their cans or whatever. You know? I'm like, you can literally bring this love of your earth mother into every facet of your existence, you know?

Here, Rick postures against an imagined community of other environmentalists who did not, in his opinion, live up to their espoused commitments. Relatedly, in the following discussion Blake positions himself against imaginary Preppers that he sees as distracted from the primary goal of self-sufficiency.

They have this idea that ... they can stock up on canned food and have a bunch of knives and ammo and that's gonna make them prepared... Prepping to me is a life – I am a prepper. But I am a prepper by lifestyle. I am prepared to live off the land like at the drop of a hat. Because I know, I've prepared myself over the years to, to have the skills that I need to build a primitive structure or an advanced structure or grow my own food or harvest from the land. Or do any of those things that you know I feel would make me prepared.

Blake, like Rick, evaluates his and others' lifestyle against the benchmark of how well they achieve ideological goals – how well they live out their commitment to be prepared. Lastly, participants saw themselves through the eyes of imagined others, revealing guilt or defensiveness in interviews around the areas in which they feel they short of ideological imperatives and so risk judgement from others. Todd, for example, explains to me his feelings about not having solar panels:

So I'm not big on solar panels. I guess if I had the money right now, it would certainly make sense to get them. You know. I mean, it would pay off really quickly. That's what other folks here have done. [Sighs] I'd rather buy plants and go camping. You know, it's, I don't know. Maybe it's a little selfish, you know, because the power I use comes from a nuclear power plant. I don't like

that. It makes me feel guilty. Oh, that was a long rant. You asked me like what other things and I – I'm defensive about not having solar panels, that's weird...

From the ways that Todd hesitates, second guesses himself, frequently changes directions in his thoughts, and directly admits to feeling “guilty” and “defensive,” he is in an imagined conversation with others who hold similar ideological motivations, justifying his actions to them.

In short, these patterns show that despite engaging in similar practices, those with and without identity strains imagine themselves to be a part of different communities. More optimistic, non-ideological participants see themselves as part of a diverse group of individuals engaging in homesteading practices; more resigned, strained participants see themselves as part of an ideological group of people that use homesteading to achieve or express particular commitments. This key difference again suggests that ideologies are a primary reason that participants with identity strains join the homesteading movement, which I argue shows their efforts to reclaim strained identities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I build a case that ideological accounts of homesteading serve to restore participants' vocabularies of motives of conscientiousness and independence in the face of inefficacy and pessimism. In so doing, the adoption of these accounts helps to restore desired identities under the threat of outlooks that challenge one's ability to claim those identities. Specifically, the opting out frame gives participants a way to explain their lives as efforts to disengage with harmful, unethical systems, giving them claim to conscientious lives while allowing them to feel disheartened at the prospect of institutional change. For those who primarily draw on vocabularies of independence, the opting out frame restores a sense of control and empowerment over one's one security and livelihood while continuing to feel that the future will be worse than the present. Participants thus adopt ideological accounts for their lifestyles

when doing so accomplishes identity work for them. After constructing a case around how the *content* of ideological accounts helps participants to minimize, circumvent, or rationalize their inefficacy and pessimism, I argue that participants take the time to seek out, learn, use, and incorporate into their identity ideological accounts when they have identity strains. To do so, I show that participants with identity strains tended to learn the ideological accounts through a process of self-directed research, to regularly invoke these accounts in interviews, and to identify with those ideologies in the collective identities they espouse.

This chapter continues to build on and contribute to efforts to understand the way personal identities shape movement participation, as well as the intersection between personal and collective identity. This dissertation builds on previous studies that analyze activism as a way to construct a desirable self through seeking to “instantiate” certain qualities through their “actions and lives” (Teske 2009; Grigsby 2004) or a “moral” self (Allahyari 2001). My work more specifically shows that activism may be a way to *restore* a desirable self under the condition that participants hold feelings and thoughts they understand to contradict their identities. This argument of using movement participation to restore identities in the face of threatening conditions extends and fine tunes previous work on similar mechanisms. For example, Kaplan and Liu (2000) analyze movement participation as a way to restore “spoiled identities,” by which they mean stigmatized social identities (e.g. disabled/gay/people of color). My work extends this theory of movement participation to include not just social identities but desired personal identities – those identities people voluntarily claim because they are valued identities within their communities and cultures.

Additionally, this chapter reveals a pathway to participation that differs from many theories around participation, with minimal influence from networks or organizations. Similar to

the discovery of heightened pessimism and inefficacy in participants, this finding demonstrates how expanding our definition of movements to incorporate action outside of the contentious politics paradigm can provide problematize existing theories, and pose new theoretical understandings that can help explain less common forms of movement behavior. This chapter more specifically extends work that seeks to understand how people come to join movements in the absence of pre-existing networks and organizations (Jasper & Poulsen 1995; Jasper's 1997; Young 2001). Lastly, this finding of self-recruitment contributes to our understanding of lifestyle movements more specifically, given that previous work has found that pre-existing networks were most influential to bringing people to lifestyle movements (Haenfler et al. 2012). This finding suggests the need for more empirical work to explain under what conditions networks do and don't play a strong role within lifestyle movements.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In my foray into the homesteading movement, I encountered a fantastically diverse array of people, almost all of whom accounted for simple domestic activities – like baking bread and canning tomatoes – as motivated by ideological commitments oriented toward expressing dissent and contention with the status quo. In their conversations with me, they sought to render seemingly private lifestyle choices as ideologically-driven, deliberate efforts to challenge the social and environmental issues about which they were concerned. They, in short, understood their homesteading lifestyle to be about much more than gardening and preserving food. Using the theoretically-motivated language I have adopted in this dissertation, my interviewees understood and accounted for their lifestyles as *ideologically structured contentious action*.

I argue that homesteading is a particularly clear example of what has recently been termed a lifestyle movement (Haenfler et al. 2012) – those loosely networked collectives of individuals reshaping the private actions of their daily lives in opposition to large-scale institutional problems. Within lifestyle movements, characteristics found on the margins of most movements, and thus the margins of academic research, become prominent features – ongoing, daily activism in the private sphere, conducted by individuals with few connections to organizations or other participants, in which participation in the movement is as discursive as it is rooted in actions or behaviors. We are better able to examine private and discursive dimensions of movement behavior by studying a movement that accentuates such features. Centralizing processes typically on the boundaries of academic study provides a unique opportunity not only to extend our understanding of social movements, but also a frontier in



which to develop conceptual tools and analytical frameworks that best account for these features. In this approach, this dissertation builds on and contributes to an ever-growing branch of scholarship that seeks to diversify the forms of social movements studied beyond the contentious politics perspective (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Haenfler et al. 2012; Snow 2004; Zald 2000) and in so doing have contributed a number of theoretically innovative concepts and insights about movement participation more broadly. Like these scholars, I venture off more commonly treaded empirical ground to extend our theoretical understanding of movements.

In this dissertation, I offer a methodological contribution to the study of movements by constructing a theoretical framework developed to understand and leverage the unique properties of participation in lifestyle movements. This framework examines interviews as a convergence of multiple types of narratives and forms of self-presentation, and examines the relationships between these forms of discourse – including the way they reinforce as well as diverge from one another. In the first, I look at accounts, or the explanations or rationales that participants’ offer to explain to others and themselves why they engage in homesteading practices. Building on the work of Zald (2000), Oliver and Johnston (2000), and Snow (2004), I argue that participation in lifestyle movements is best understood as the degree to which one accounts for daily habits and practices (one’s lifestyle) as driven by contentious ideologies. The main goal of analysis was thus to determine the conditions under which people come to ideologically account for their lifestyles as contentious action; to do so, I analyzed what thoughts and emotions emerged in subtle ways throughout the course of the interview but were not espoused in accounts (outlooks), as well as how interviewees articulated their identities, particularly in the way they explained their motives and intentions in the stories of their lives (vocabularies of motives). This

framework is intellectually indebted to Scott and Lyman's (1968) work on accounts; Pugh's (2013) methodological work that encourages researchers to "mine" the discrepant narratives offered in interviews and to pay close attention to how non-verbal cues and the delivery of responses provides insight into thoughts and feelings one does not claim in self-presentations; and Mills (1940) contribution of the insightful, though underutilized in contemporary work, concept of vocabularies of motive. This framework builds on but extends beyond more conventional social psychological approaches – such as frames, collective identities, and emotions.

This dissertation used the accounts of individuals who engage in homesteading practices to analyze the conditions under which people come to interpret and explain their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action. These stories were gathered over the course of almost two years through in-depth, open ended interviews with individuals sampled purposively to represent a diverse range of accounts. Additionally, my recruitment and sampling strategies were designed to reach increasingly isolated participants to emphasize the individualized, private movement behavior in which I was theoretically interested. Seeking to reach more isolated participants was an attempt to capture those individuals who engaged primarily through their lifestyles – as opposed to individuals who were involved in more public contentious action and extended those commitments into the private realm.

## **Findings**

In this section, I will summarize my findings and how they contribute to the field more generally. To do this, I will take up each chapter in turn and explain what I sought to do within them, as well as how each chapter contributes to broader claims.

My overarching argument is that people come to participate in lifestyle movements as a way to restore their desired identities when they feel enmeshed in meaningless, harmful, or unstable systems – yet powerless to effect any sort of systemic change. When people claim identities that compel a response to such problematic systems, yet collective action seems futile, adopting ideological accounts to explain one’s lifestyle allows people to claim that their individual lives *are* responses to such systems. These ideological accounts enable participants to symbolically distance themselves from what they see as unethical or unsustainable systems, restoring their ability to claim certain identities while leaving the systems themselves intact. In the following sections, I will briefly recount the main claims of each chapter to show how they build this broader theoretical argument.

## ***Chapter Two***

In chapter two, I argue that participants with the deepest participation in a lifestyle movement – who expressed the strongest ideological motivations for engaging in homesteading, connecting their private actions with social meanings and purposes –were also those who felt most despondent about the direction of social systems, their role within them, and their ability to change them. From this strong pattern, I argue that negativity and pessimism appear to *motivate* participation in a lifestyle movement, suggesting an intuitive paradox that I seek to resolve with the remainder of the dissertation – how can pessimism and inefficacy motivate action rather than apathy?

Building off of the methodological insights of Pugh (20213), I use interview data to elaborate the pessimistic *outlooks* of interviewees – perspectives that appeared unprompted in those conversations in which I was not calling on people to account for or justify their homesteading. I argue that the discrepancy between outlooks and more positive *accounts* – in

which participants explained the rationale that they typically offered to others and themselves for why they participated in homesteading— shows that negativity and pessimism were not perspectives that participants emphasized in the way they present themselves to others or think about their own identities, but were nonetheless present in the majority of interviews.

Analyzing interview data, I show that interviewees felt that fundamental systems of our society – for example, our economy, culture, political system, and infrastructure - were both fundamentally broken and increasingly encroaching on individual lives. This perception resulted in the concern that individuals could no longer depend on larger systems for their well-being and safety, and could no longer count on anyone but themselves to make ethical, humane decisions. I then show that many participants described time periods in their lives prior to adopting homesteading which can be interpreted as critical moments in which they came to feel that they personally had a stake in these issues – that they as individuals were losing control over their own security or their ability to lead a meaningful life.

I then argued that while these grievances were not necessarily surprising, the perceived permanence and intractability of these problems – and resulting feelings of resignation and hopelessness – were surprising given a large body of literature that shows that people are most likely to participate in movements when they believe they have the ability to change their social or political environments (van Zomeren et al. 2008; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Klandermans 2013). Using interview data, I show that participants felt that problems in large part were irreparable and that the future was likely to be worse than the present, and that they felt cynical about the extent to which institutional change was possible at all – much less through their own role in the political system or collective action. Moreover, participants in general were doubtful that homesteading itself was an effective instrument to affect change on the problems they had

discussed. I argue that not only were these findings contradictory to expectations, but generally puzzling – why act, if doing so is not understood as an effort to change the problematic systems about which one is concerned?

In this chapter, I contend that movement literature does not currently provide a satisfactory answer to this question. While a range of studies have found that efficacy plays a secondary role to identity or ideology-based motivations (e.g. Jasper 1997; Goodwin et al. 2001; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Melucci 1989), my findings differ in that efficacy is not a minimal or subordinate concern. Rather, *inefficacy* plays a vital role in participants' pathway to participation; inefficacy is not the absence of or indifference to efficacy, but a central focus on feeling helpless and resigned. Similarly, the presence of passive, acquiescent emotions is left unexplained by current literature on movements, which predict more active emotions like anger (van Zomeren et al. 2008). Thus, this presents a new puzzle around movement behavior which I seek to address for the remainder of the dissertation.

### ***Chapter Three***

In chapter three, I argue that pessimism and inefficacy can be motivating when these perceptions are interpreted by individuals as *problematic* – in which case, acting becomes an effort to cope with problematic outlooks and emotions. In the case of homesteading, I argue that pessimism and inefficacy were interpreted as problematic because they conflicted with participants' personal identities, creating an *identity strain* in which one holds feelings and perspectives that are difficult to incorporate into one's sense of self. This strain motivates people to participate in a lifestyle movement – to act – in order to resolve this strain.

Specifically, I claim that pessimistic outlooks and negative feelings threaten the types of accounts that participants typically use to explain their behavior to others and themselves – what

Mills (1940) termed “vocabularies of motives.” I argue that vocabularies of motive, socially learned through the cultures in which one is embedded, are key ways in which people articulate their shared identities to others, including their values, priorities, and intentions (Kuhns and Ramirez-Valles 2015). They are thus central to personal identities, making disruptions to one’s vocabularies of motives threats to one’s identity. In the case of homesteading, resignation and inefficacy undermines participants’ ability to explain themselves as conscientious and/or independent people; feeling entangled in the systems about which one is concerned and has no control disrupts one’s ability to explain life as either intentional or self-determined.

To construct this case, I first use interview data to show the contradictions and inconsistencies within interviews, in which participants both held and disavowed resigned attitudes about the future and cynicism about their ability to change it. Specifically, participants offered discrepant responses to direct questions around efficacy and in their unprompted discussions of inefficacy; evaded questions of efficacy or provided ambivalent responses; and claimed positive emotions and perspectives in the way they described themselves and their identities, despite more negative viewpoints. I contend that these efforts to deny, de-emphasize, and contradict these outlooks show that participants found them problematic – something they felt but did not want to acknowledge or emphasize.

Next, I analyze interview data for shared identities in an effort to better understand why participants might want to distance themselves from the resigned, negative attitudes they express. Through this analysis, I show that participants consistently explained their motives – of their actions, decisions, and general life courses – as a function of their conscientiousness and/or independence. For vocabularies of conscientiousness, participants explained their lives as an accumulation of deliberate choices made in the context of his/her understanding of larger social

issues and problems. In particular, participants used the specific motives of seeking meaning, authenticity, intentionality, and altruism. For vocabularies of independence, participants explained their lives as self-determined, in which larger social issues and problems neither assisted nor restrained their decisions. Specifically, participants painted a picture of their lives as constructed of autonomous, nonconformist decisions and self-determined destinies.

I argue that these vocabularies of motives – central aspects of participants’ identities, as revealed by their salience in interviews – are disrupted or threatened by pessimistic future predictions and feelings of helplessness. To feel that systems are irreparably immoral or unstable means that one’s participation in that system makes them complicit (for the conscientious) or controlled by (for the independent) the very systems against which they articulate their identity. When one feels that collective action is futile and they have little ability to shape the direction of these systems, they are left with a dilemma. Continuing participation in a problematic system, perceived as compliance with or dependence on that system, cannot be ignored, as it hinders one’s ability to explain their actions and thus serves as conscientious or independent. This contradiction creates an identity strain in which one’s worldview and feelings are at odds with the identity they seek to claim; participants could not simultaneously claim their negative outlooks and their espoused identities.

#### ***Chapter Four***

In chapter four, I come full circle to provide a response to the original question posed by this dissertation – *how do people come to account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action?* I argue that people account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action when doing so helps to ease identity strains created when one holds outlooks that contradict his/her identity; under these conditions, adopting the account enables participants

to reclaim or maintain desired identities. Accordingly, because accounts fulfill this role, participants with the greatest identity strains – seen through the biggest discrepancy between negative outlooks and espoused vocabularies of motives – come to hold the strongest, most articulate, and most coherent accounts.

To build this argument, I first show how ideological accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) of homesteading help to resolve the tensions between participants’ understanding of themselves and the feelings of pessimism and resignation that they hold but seek to reject. In the case of homesteading, participants adopted ideological accounts because these narratives gave them a framework they could use to make sense of, bypass, minimize, or rationalize their inefficacy and pessimism. To construct this argument, I use interview data to analyze the types of ideological accounts participants offered to explain their homesteading. I show that the majority of participants invoked accounts that incorporated what I term an “opting out” frame, in which participants explained homesteading as a way to voluntarily withdraw from, and thus reduce compliance with or dependence on, harmful and dysfunctional systems. By invoking this frame in their accounts, participants refashioned participation in the private sphere as a deliberate withdrawal from the public sphere by replacing one’s involvement in larger social systems with home-based systems. In general, participants used accounts that drew on two versions of the “opting out” frame: 1) that withdrawing from systems was a way to reduce compliance with the unethical processes and problematic impacts of those systems; and (2) that withdrawing from systems reduced dependence on systems that were unpredictable and unstable. In this section, I explored the nuances and patterns within these two more general framings.

Additionally, I work to show how, specifically, ideological accounts of homesteading help individuals explain themselves as conscientious or independent people despite feelings of



resignation and pessimism. For the conscientious, the opting out frame helps participants articulate a version of ethics and altruism that does not require engagement with or impact on unethical systems. For those who draw on both conscientious and independent VOMs, the opting out frame provides a sense of empowerment, restoring their ability to claim that they are doing something about the social and environmental issues about which they are concerned when other options seem futile. For the independent, the opting out frame provides participants a way to minimize their feelings of helplessness by granting them the ability to claim that they are taking charge of their own destiny and well-being through self-sufficiency, equated with control. In short, using ideological accounts framed through the logic of opting out resolves the tension created by pessimism and inefficacy by giving participants a way to claim that they are neither pessimistic or resigned.

Next, I analyze the patterned differences between how those with weak and strong ideological accounts explained how they came to engage in homesteading practices, including how they came to learn, and how they use, ideological accounts. By strong ideological accounts, I mean these accounts were salient, coherently articulated, and elaborated in interviews. I argue that ideologies come to the forefront when one has to articulate them to oneself and others to resolve, or explain away, a feeling or belief one holds that is perceived as problematic. In these situations, ideological accounts do more identity work for the individual and require conscious articulation and elaboration. If ideologies do not fulfill a strong need for one's identity, they may be known and referenced occasionally but are not as emphasized in one's accounting for the homesteading lifestyle.

I show that participants who did not express, or held weak, ideological motivations were more likely to join the movement through social networks and see homesteading as an extension

of their participation in those pre-existing communities. In comparison, participants who were seeking to resolve an identity strain were more likely to seek out and self-recruit into the homesteading lifestyle. Because they were looking for this lifestyle instead of being recruited into it through their networks, they were more likely to be introduced to the lifestyle through a “discursive field” (Haenfler et al. 2012) – books, websites, blogs, videos that collectively organize and provide coherency to the movement. Lastly, these participants were most likely to consider these ideologies as central to their collective identities, showing that they identify with the ideas behind the lifestyle even more than the practices themselves. Each of these factors strengthen ideological accounts, as participants are more likely to encounter elaborated, coherent ideologies through written sources, are more likely to take the time to learn them if they fulfill an identity need, and are more likely to continuously assess their actions through the eyes of imagined others and consequently seek to align their practices to the ideology if they adopt a collective identity and in so doing so join an imagined community. In short, participants seek out, learn, use, and incorporate into their identities ideological accounts when they hold identity strains.

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In sum, the goal of this project was to shed light on participation in lifestyle movements through better understanding how participants come to account for their lifestyles as ideologically structured contentious action. In broad strokes, I found that some of the key perceptions (inefficacy) and emotions (pessimism) that typically decrease the likelihood of participation in public, contentious collective action increase the likelihood of participation in loosely organized, individualized activism. This is the case under certain conditions – specifically, when individuals feel compelled to respond in order to claim identities or draw on

vocabularies of motive that would be undermined by *inaction*. When individuals have lost faith in the ability of institutions to change and doubt their ability to make a difference, yet feel compelled to respond, they do so on an individual scale. Despite ambivalence as to the extent to which this action impacts social realities, employing the “opting out” frame in their accounts gives them a way to explain their actions that is consistent with their claimed identities and vocabularies of motive.

Contributions

This dissertation offers several contributions to the field of social movements. As I detail below, this study sheds light on the motivating role of inefficacy and pessimism under certain conditions; the interplay between identity, efficacy, and ideology; the ways in which personal identity can play a role in movement participation; conceptual tools that are helpful in analyzing shared aspects of personal identity; understandings of how people can come to participate in movements in the absence of pre-existing social networks or organizational ties; the rise in individualization of political expression; and lifestyle and “everyday” dimensions of activism within all movements. These contributions, I believe, confirm the benefits of expanding the empirical study of movements beyond the contentious politics paradigm, as doing so can yield new understandings, as evoke new analytical questions, about social movements.

First, this study revealed the benefits of expanding the scope of movement research beyond the contentious politics perspective, as I found that participation in lifestyle movements differs in key ways from more public, coordinated collective action. Specifically, this dissertation shed light on how inefficacy and pessimism can actually *motivate* movement participation under the condition that inefficacy undermines one’s identity. This finding offers an important insight that complicates existing theories around the relationship between collective

efficacy and movement participation (Klandermans 2013). This finding validates the need to study alternative forms of movements in which certain features are particularly exaggerated, as doing so deepens our understanding of the dimensions that impact movement participation. By studying a movement in which individualized, private activism was so central, my study suggests a relationship between inefficacy and more private forms of activism that likely maps on to movements more broadly; that is, this dissertation suggests that collective efficacy increases along the private/public continuum of movement activism.

By showing how identity-based motives provide a basis for action in the absence of a sense of efficacy my findings develop our understanding of the interaction between identity and efficacy-based motives – a link rarely studied empirically (Klandermans 2004). This study demonstrates how efficacy can be inextricably tied to personal identity, such that efficacy is embedded in the ways that people articulate their identities through their vocabularies of motive. This shows how identity and efficacy-based motives can be intertwined in that identity is rooted in efficacious accounts. In other words, people can think of themselves as individuals who engage or respond to problems, or think of themselves as hopeful, empowered people (e.g. Frye 2012). Often conceptualized as distinct dimensions that impact movement participation (Klandermans 2004), this dissertation suggests new ways of understanding the relationship between efficacy and identity. Additionally, by analyzing the distinction between accounts of motives and outlooks, I show that perceptions of efficacy and *accounts* of efficacy do not always align. In this dissertation, participants offered efficacious accounts, but their interviews betrayed more resigned outlooks. This finding complicates our conceptualization of efficacy and suggests that survey findings that consistently reveal that efficacy increases the likelihood of movement

participation (van Zomeren et al. 2008) may be rooted more in the way participants *see themselves* than strict beliefs in the possibility of social change.

In the argument that participants join lifestyle movements in an effort to maintain personal identities when those identities are strained by perceptions and emotions perceived as problematic, my analysis reveals the ways in which socially constructed and learned personal identities play a role in movement participation, rather than collective identities. Within movements, personal identity is often understood as marginal to movement participation relative to collective identity, but recently scholars have called for the re-examination of the intersection of personal identity and movement participation (Haenfler et al. 2012; Bennett 1998); this dissertation responds to those calls. Moreover, while previous work has suggested generally that personal identity work is critical to participation in lifestyle movements (Haenfler et al. 2012; Grigsby 2004), this dissertation offers a deepened understanding of what types of personal identity work participants engage in – suggesting the “work” done by ideological accounts is that of restoration or coping. While previous work has examined how activism can be an avenue to construct a desirable self (e.g. Teske 2009, Taylor 1989, Lichterman 1996) or restore identity under the condition of social stigma (Kaplan and Liu 2000), this work offers a perspective that builds on, but differs from, these mechanisms – movement participation as an avenue to restore (as distinct from construct) desired (as distinct from socially ascribed) personal identities.

Moreover, I believe that exploring vocabularies of motives, and in so doing analyzing personal identity as the narratives we offer to others to explain our motives and intentions, offers multiple contributions to the field of movements. I argue that a focus on vocabularies of motives enables researchers to examine the intersection between personal and collective identities, giving them the ability to see patterns in aspects of personal identity among participants who otherwise

see themselves as a part of very different social groups. This concept focuses on the meaning-making processes that extend from particular identities – the way participants seek to present their selves to others (and themselves) – conceptualizing identity as process rather than a more static grouping or label. Secondly, analyzing the vocabularies of motives of participants offers movement scholars one avenue through which to study pre-movement socialization; in this study, participants describe being socialized into vocabularies of motive before adopting the homesteading lifestyle. Vocabularies of motives are a largely unexplored aspect of identity within the field of movements, and could yield new insights around participation.

Additionally, this dissertation examines a pathway to movement participation that differs from many theories. Participants tended to self-recruit into the lifestyle and discovered the movement through media platforms; networks and organizations played a minimal role, if any. This discovery extends work that seeks to understand how people come to join movements in the absence of pre-existing networks (Jasper & Poulsen 1995; Young 2001). Moreover, this finding again demonstrates the worth of expanding the study of movements to accommodate those outside of the contentious politics model, as it shows how commonly accepted principles of participation may not be universally applicable. Lastly, these findings call attention to the need to continue empirically studying lifestyle movements, as this pathway contradicts previous studies of that found that pre-existing networks were most influential to bringing people to lifestyle movements (Haenfler et al. 2012). More work is needed to better understand under what conditions networks do and don't play a strong role within lifestyle movements.

In general, this research contributes to our understanding of new forms of activism that may be rising in prominence. Scholars have theorized the recent “rise in individualization” in political expression, a trend that appears to accompany the increasing elevation of the importance

of the individual in organizing social life, taking the place of institutions (Shah et al. 2012; Craig 2007; Frank and Meyer 2002). Moreover, scholars have argued that loosely organized collectives of individuals, rather than organizations and institutions, are fast becoming a fixture on the political landscape (Bennett 2012). For example, many scholars have noted that new forms of media allow for new methods of recruitment and forms of participation, including loosely organized, network-oriented activism (e.g. Caren et al. 2012; Carty 2010; Bennett 2012). This study helps us understand this individualized activism by helping elucidate participants' perceptions of their actions and accounts of their motivations.

Lastly, this study deepens understanding of the everyday, private dimensions of movement behavior that is found within all movements, if not their core (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007; Haenfler et al. 2012; Powell 1992; Almanzar et al. 1998). Studies suggest that the strategic use of lifestyles to effect change is an integral, if often invisible, form of activism (Shah et al 2012). While such activities are potentially consequential and recognized theoretically as an avenue to social change (Taylor and Whittier 1992), their lack of public visibility has relegated them to the margins of academic discussion (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007). I have argued that studying alternative forms of movements will accentuate and illuminate processes that can then be reapplied to our understanding of movements more generally; in this case, by studying a lifestyle movement, we better understand the everyday, private activism found within all movements. In doing so, this study speaks to the “scholarly blind spot concealing the intersections of private action and movement participation, personal change and social change, and personal identity and collective identity” (Haenfler et al. 2012: 2).

Agenda for Future Research

To end, I'd like to close with a forward-looking discussion of the implications of this study in terms of possible future avenues of inquiry for research. I believe this study offers a range of insights that can be further developed, and raises questions that open up possibilities for new research agendas.

First, given the inherent limits of case study research in terms of generalizability, additional research examining lifestyle movements should work to confirm these findings. I believe that my research provides patterns and insights that likely map on to other lifestyle movements, but it's possible that there is something unique about the homesteading movement such that participants of other lifestyle movements do not experience the perceptions of inefficacy and pessimism so prevalent in this study. In general, more work is needed to confirm that participation in lifestyle movements is an identity-driven effort to restore desired personal identities in the face of resignation at the possibility of institutional change. If this pattern is not as pronounced in other lifestyle movements, then empirical and theoretical work will be needed to understand in what ways the homesteading movement differs from other lifestyle movements. Additionally, future research could examine the accounts, frames, and ideologies offered by participants of other lifestyle movements to determine the extent to which the opting out frame constitutes a more universal frame for lifestyle movements, or is specific to homesteading.

Moreover, this dissertation speaks to but does not fully resolve a range of questions about lifestyle movements whose answers would be strengthened by additional research using different methodologies. For example, this study suggests that in large part participants of lifestyle movements have rejected more public forms of activism, but the relationship between private and public forms of activism needs to be studied further in different types of movements. In

particular, longitudinal research could best study the relationship between private and public activism over time, and test, for example, the theory that lifestyle activism serves as an abeyance structure (Haenfler et al. 2012; Rupp and Taylor 1987; Taylor 1989) – keeping activist identities and commitments alive until a more receptive political or cultural climate. Additionally, as I discuss earlier in this dissertation, data strongly suggests that participants were socialized into their vocabularies of motive before engaging with homesteading practices, but longitudinal research could better address the ways in which participants are socialized into particular vocabularies of motive. Lastly, while the interview method was ideal for eliciting accounts, ethnographies or discourse analysis looking at online forums could better speak to how ideological movement accounts are used, learned, and negotiated in practice.

Moreover, nationally representative research should study the extent to which lifestyle movements are a growing form of activism. As I discuss briefly in this dissertation, other scholars and researchers have argued that the loosely networked, individualized form of activism found within lifestyle movements is increasing in prominence and may effectively be replacing formally organized collective action as we know it (Shah et al. 2012; Bennett 1998). This dissertation, as an examination of one case through in-depth interviews, can neither confirm nor deny this trend, although two of my findings support this theory: (1) almost all of the people I interviewed had adopted homesteading practices within the last five years, and (2) participants rarely if ever mentioned formal organizations and several discussed technologies, such as blogs and meet-up groups, that have only existed in recent decades, suggesting that new technologies enable individualized activism in a way that previously didn't exist. If this is truly a growing trend, it may shed light on how to understand the documented waning of civic life (Putnam 2001). For decades, public media has warned of the rise of "Generation Me," a cultural trend in

which individuals are seen to be increasingly self-focused, with a declining sense of social responsibility and waning contributions to civic life. Yet, what has been projected as increasing self-concern might instead be the rise of individualized forms of contributions to social life.

If individualized, private activism is indeed an increasingly prominent trend, this shift prompts a number of questions about the consequences or outcomes of rising individualism, the fading of social movement organizations, and the decline of public claims-making. Most important among these would be the comparative examination of the effectiveness of lifestyle movements compared with more public, coordinated collective action. To what extent may the interviewees in this study be right to express cynicism and doubt that changing the actions of their daily lives impacts larger social realities? Do individual changes in consumption, in aggregate, impact current institutions and structures as effectively as protest or other forms of activism? Or, does engagement with lifestyle movements privilege “moral identity work” over real outcomes, providing individuals claims that ultimately blind them from seeing the actual consequences of their actions (e.g. Kleinman 1996)? While some have expressed concern over this perceived trend, and cynicism over its ability to change social institutions (e.g. Matchar 2013), to my knowledge this has not been rigorously studied. In addition to these questions around the outcomes of lifestyle movements are questions around how individualized lifestyle activism reshapes the organization and strategies of social movements generally. A number of theories proposed by others – that social media enables individuals to recruit others in their network and so bypass formal organizations and that consequently personal action frames are displacing collective frames (Bennett 2012), and that in such movements personal identity work is more crucial than collective identity work (Grigsby 2004) – are in early stages and could be researched and confirmed by further work.

In addition to the study of lifestyle movements, this dissertation generally calls attention to the need to continue to expand the scope of movement research to alternative forms of movements that do not fit the contentious politics model and so have received little scholarly attention. In particular, this dissertation suggests that well-known and accepted movement processes may operate differently in alternative movement forms – such as the relationship between efficacy and participation (Corrigan-Brown 2012; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Gamson 1968) and anger and participation (e.g. van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; van Zomeren et al. 2004; Leach et al. 2007). As I have argued throughout this dissertation, examining cases in which certain characteristics are particularly accentuated (as is the private, individualized nature of activism within lifestyle movements) will likely accentuate other dimensions and processes (in this case, movement participation as discursive as well as action-based, inefficacy, resignation, and participation as an attempt to alleviate identity strains). By studying cases in which particular dimensions and characteristics of movement behavior are exaggerated, we magnify them so that they can better understood. The insights and findings from such studies can then be used to illuminate similar processes found in any movement that may not be as readily apparent.

For example, this dissertation highlights the need to further study under what conditions inefficacy and passive, acquiescent emotions can play motivating roles in movement participation. Intuitively argued to inhibit action, and widely empirically confirmed as a deterrent to movement participation (Jasper 1998; Gould 2009; Klandermans et al. 2008), this study illuminates a more complex relationship between these perceptions and emotions and movement participation. This relationship invokes new analytic questions around the extent to which this finding translates to other forms of movements. The first area of research that could

build on this insight would be to better understand if inefficacy plays a motivating role in other types of movements, as well as to explore if inefficacy always provokes a more individualized, identity-driven response – or if it can play a role in more conventional, public collective action. Moreover, researchers could examine the conditions under which movement participants more clearly *espouse* inefficacy, rather than seek to minimize it. Such studies could shed light on the circumstances in which it is socially acceptable within social movements to admit to resignation.

Moreover, while the question of to what extent lifestyle activism is on the rise is certainly worth studying in its own right, the finding that homesteading is motivated by resignation and pessimism make such questions more complex. If individualized, private activism is increasing in prominence, to what extent may this be related to increasing disenchantment with the social systems that govern our world and an increasing sense of helplessness to change their course? If these patterns are indeed related, what might be the consequences – and causes – of an increasing prevalence of resignation and pessimism in our society? This area of study provides fruitful work for researchers of social movements, but also sociologists across the spectrum.

Lastly, future research should apply, and continue to develop, the conceptual tools proposed in this dissertation for future work in social movements – and sociology more generally. I have advocated for the utility in examining vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940) as a key way people articulate their identities, in the hopes of reinvigorating an older concept and bridging work on social psychology and social movements. With vocabularies of motive, as well as the analytical focus on ideological accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968), I have again sought to revise an older insight that motives are best understood as descriptions of behavior rather than external, pre-existing conditions compelling people to act in certain ways. In a focus on accounts, I have proposed a new way of understanding movement participation as discursive,

again leveraging the strengths of interview data. Building off of new work (Pugh 2013), I have sought to analyze and understand discrepant responses in interviews, rather than understand such contradictions as a methodological problem that discredits the data. This framework, I argue, yielded a rich analysis; I believe future researchers could benefit from this perspective in future research.

An Ending Note

By focusing on the way that interviewees told the stories of their lives and selves, rather than the labels and social categories we so often use to divide the world – liberal/conservative, religious/atheist, educated/uneducated, and even political/apolitical or activist/non-activist – I came to see underlying unity among people who would often be understood as the “poles” of the ideological spectrum. This, I believe, was the most useful aspect of my theoretical framework that led to the richest insights and the greatest personal impacts. In an incredibly divisive political climate during a time in which there seems to be more and more evidence of a fracturing society, it was powerful to have the ability to see the shared concerns and fears of participants – that human-created systems and institutions were increasingly outside of our control and that people were losing the ability to lead a life of their own making. And, in a sample that seemed to run the gamut in a variety of social dimensions, being able to see the shared aspects of their identities – united by individualism, intentionality, and a sense of oneself as a free-thinking maverick – for me decimated the easy categories into which I regularly place others. Lastly, analyzing the ideologies participants espouse and in so doing noticing the way that individuals draw on a variety of ideas rooted in both liberal and conservative worldviews, for me was a strong reminder that the mutually exclusive camps so regularly discussed in popular media are not an accurate representation of the complexity of real humans. My hope is

that this study, in some capacity, did the same for the reader, serving as a reminder of unity among discord and the connections between even the most ostensibly disparate individuals.

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