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# Praying “Straight from the Heart”: Evangelical sincerity and the normative frames of culture in action

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## ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographies of two Evangelical Christian contexts in the U.S., this article investigates how Evangelicals' expectation that prayer be *sincere* – i.e., an honest reflection of the praying subject's true thoughts, feelings, and desires – enabled prayer to do particular kinds of cultural work for Evangelicals at the same time it created a series of troubling dilemmas surrounding the practice itself. Through this empirical analysis, we develop the more general theoretical concept of *normative frames* to draw broader sociological attention to how groups' normative expectations regarding how cultural tools should (and should not) work interact with and influence the pragmatics of culture in action. We discuss how future sociological scholarship on the possibilities and problems of culture in action can benefit from further study of the complex and sometimes paradoxical interplay between cultural tools and their normative frames.

## 1. Introduction

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Protestant Evangelical contexts in the U.S., this paper investigates a paradox at the heart of the Evangelical practice of prayer. In the hands of Evangelical Christians, prayer is what many sociological analysts of culture would call a quintessential cultural tool (c.f., Swidler, 1986, 2001; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Evangelicals in our studies developed not only a deeply spiritual but also a highly pragmatic relationship to prayer, using it in a variety of situations to confront everyday problems and build strategies of action – e.g., to address a personal trouble like a stressful job interview or exam, build and solidify social bonds, demarcate salient in-group and out-group boundaries, etc.

Yet, at the same time Evangelicals used prayer to solve everyday dilemmas of action, we observed how prayer *itself* became a problematic source of anxiety and concern in their lives. Regularly engaging in prayer confronted actors in both settings with a series of conundrums surrounding the practice: Am I saying my prayers with the right intentions? What if my seemingly spontaneous prayers are really routinized habits? How do I make sure my prayers are truly “from the heart” and not “empty rituals”?

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We argue these problem-solving and problem-generating features of prayer are deeply interconnected in that they both stem from the same *normative frame*, our term for a group's cultural expectations regarding how actors ought (and ought not) to perform and experience a particular practice. More specifically, we find Evangelicals' normative framing of prayer as *sincere* – i.e., that prayer should be nothing more or less than an honest reflection of one's true thoughts, feelings, and desires – both enabled prayer to do particular kinds of work for Evangelicals at the same time it created a series of troubling anxieties surrounding the practice itself, particularly about the alignment (or lack thereof) between “outer” forms and “inner” selves.

While our analysis is necessarily focused on the empirical case at hand, we contend this study of the paradoxes of sincerity in prayer makes two more general contributions to sociological studies of culture in action. First, and most broadly, the concept of *normative frames* reintegrates a normative dimension into contemporary theories of culture in action while maintaining Swidler's original commitment to rejecting a Parsonian model of “downloading” cultural structures *before* and as a *preceding explanation* of action. In contrast to Parsons, we suggest a model inspired by elements of Goffman's interactionism and Dewey's pragmatism, one that keeps in the spirit of the “creativity of action” (Joas, 1997) that influenced early work on cultural repertoires (e.g. Swidler, 2001) but nevertheless shows how cultural strategies like prayer are simultaneously cause *and* effect of habituation into particular normative frames. We argue the concept of normative frames sensitizes sociologists to how expectations regarding appropriate performance are deeply intertwined with the pragmatics of culture-in-action, enabling social actors to deploy cultural practices as “tools” in particular ways and for particular purposes but simultaneously subjecting them to evaluative standards regarding that tool's proper performance and application. The concept of normative frames thus adds some analytic specificity to general statements that culture “works back” upon actors as much as culture does work for them (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and points to an additional mechanism by which cultural tools can have “unanticipated consequences” (Merton, 1936) for social action (e.g., Fine, 2004; Brown-Saracino & Ghaziani, 2009; McDonnell, 2016).

Second, we discuss how some of the paradoxes involved in Evangelical prayer are also evident in other practices framed by the normative demand and desire for sincerity. To illustrate this, we draw on scholarship on practices surrounding romantic relationships and celebrity, forms of culture in action in which the normative frame of sincerity is also operant. We also discuss how the same practice (e.g., prayer, romance, celebrity fandom) can take on different possibilities and problems when placed under different normative frames (e.g., sincerity vs. traditionalism vs. irony). Ultimately, we argue scholarship on culture in action can benefit from more comparative study of the complex and sometimes paradoxical interplay of cultural tools and their normative frames.

## 2. Literature and theoretical development

### 2.1. The possibilities and problems of culture in action

To understand how prayer works as both a solution to and a source of problems for Evangelicals, we first situate our research between two literatures within contemporary sociological studies of culture in action.

The first body of research takes inspiration from the “toolkit” or “repertoire” theory of culture in action, conceptualizing cultural practices as part of a “‘toolkit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler, 1986: 273). Initially developed by Swidler, this theoretical model has since been deployed by sociologists across numerous subfields including – among others – scholars of organizations (Glynn & Navis, 2013; Kellogg, 2011; Weber, 2005), education (Downey, 2008; Fine, 2004), aging (Abramson, 2015), and, most germane for our specific case study, religion (Becker, 1998; O'Brien, 2015; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Pattillo-McCoy, for example, has illustrated how African-American church culture provides a toolkit of political “strategies of action” for social movements (1998). She specifically points to prayer as “a tool for social change” (773) in that the performance of prayer serves to orient African-Americans to public problems and encourage civic engagement. Edgell Becker (1998) similarly shows how predominantly white churches creatively mine their rituals, scriptures, and norms of leadership for tools to solve organizational problems such as how to become more inclusive. More recently, O'Brien draws on toolkit/repertoire theory to show how religious individualism functions as a “discursive strategy of action” (2015) by which actors solve the dilemma of how to emphasize personal agency and autonomy while simultaneously participating in communal obligations. And Schnable (2016) demonstrates how religion affords NGOs cultural tools to address problems of legitimacy, volunteer recruitment, and linking different organizational actors.

Like other repertoire theorists of religion and culture, we found the perspective of religious practices as “tools” for constructing lines of action apt for describing how Evangelicals in our studies used prayer. While prayer, like any cultural practice, cannot be reduced to its pragmatic affordances alone, it was impossible to ignore the creative ways Evangelical actors employed prayer as a tool to address dilemmas and shape strategies of action. Yet we found the toolkit model's overarching focus on culture as a resource for action could not well account for how prayer was simultaneously a *source of problems* for Evangelicals – why, in other words, prayer itself became an object of anxiety and concern.

This limitation pointed us to a second literature that acknowledges actors as skilled and pragmatic users of culture but troubles assumptions that culture is *always* so amenable to strategic use. These scholars go beyond the abstract observation that culture acts back on actors in reified forms beyond their control (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Durkheim, 1995) by attending to specific questions of why, when, where, how and with what consequences cultural practices and repertoires constrain intentional action. Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani (2009), for example, demonstrate how problems of action arise when elements internal to a group's “toolkit” contradict one another. Other sociologists demonstrate how a commitment to particular cultural tools and toolkits – while providing resource for action in some circumstances – can produce unseen limitations in others (e.g., Perry, 2017; Poletta, 2002). Lichterman (2005), for example, demonstrates how many civic groups' customs and interactional styles limit their abilities to

critically reflect on their activities and places within the wider society, and Emerson and Smith (2000) show how Evangelicals' commitment to the toolkit of individualism limits their ability to perceive and address the structural bases of racism.

While our study takes inspiration from the above work, our analysis of prayer extends these literatures by showing how these different pragmatic aspects of culture in action – i.e., both the problem-solving and problem-inducing aspects of a particular cultural “tool” or “toolkit” – can be significantly influenced by normative expectations about how that tool should be enacted and experienced. For Evangelicals, prayer should both look and feel a particular way (i.e., sincere), and this expectation simultaneously shapes how they use prayer to solve problems and how prayer becomes a site of its own unique dilemmas of action. To better understand how this happens, we introduce the concept of normative frames.

## 2.2. Normative frames

By normative frames, we refer to a group's cultural expectations about how an actor should perform and experience a particular cultural practice. We mean “normative” here in its most extensive sense of a generally understood correct way to go about something, rather than the more morally “thick” (Abend, 2014) sense of good and evil. We mean “frame” in the broad sense of how actors conceptualize a practice, whether explicitly or implicitly. Normative frames structure how actors perceive practices should be carried out, bringing to bear certain expectations regarding proper emotions, time and place, bodily comportment, and speech. A normative frame clues actors into when a certain cultural tool might be appropriate to use and also allows them to adjudicate whether that cultural tool has been deployed successfully. For example, as we will describe below, the normative frame of sincerity allows Evangelicals to know in which contexts it is appropriate to pray and how to gauge whether that prayer has been successfully enacted.

Our emphasis on normativity might sound like exactly the kind of Parsonian emphasis toolkit theory was intended to critique, but here we outline some conceptual distinctions that differentiate our perspective from Parsons and, more importantly, show how the normative and pragmatic dimensions of culture in action interact with and influence one another. Rather than drawing from a Parsonian model of downloading cultural values via generic processes of early socialization that then go on to direct pathways of action (see Swidler, 1986), we pull from the interactionist literature on framing (Goffman, 1974; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) and pragmatist action theory (especially Dewey, 1958, 2002) to emphasize how “doing things with culture” also entails becoming subject to normative standards about “how culture should be done”.

In our conceptualization, normative expectations do not function as internalized precursors to cultural practices but as “frames” that exist with and alongside them. We build on and modify Goffman's (1974) foundational understanding of frames as interpretive schemata which organize actors' understandings of and subjective involvements in a given aspect of social life. Yet, while Goffman was most interested in how frames defined the *ontological* meaning of *situations* for actors, answering the question of “what is it that's going on here?” (1974: 8), we are interested in how frames structure the *normative* meaning and experience of *practices*, answering the questions of “how should it be done?” and “how should it feel?” Normative frames, in other words, are attached to practices *across* situations (both temporally and spatially) and furnish expectations for how a practice ought to be performed, subjectively experienced, and evaluated (by oneself and others). For the Evangelicals we studied, the performance and experience of prayer was organized by a normative frame of sincerity, the expectation that it ought to be an honest expression and reflection of one's thoughts, feelings, and desires, regardless of where, when, and for what purpose one was praying.

Along with conceptualizing these normative expectations as frames that organize the performance and experience of practices, we also draw on the pragmatism of Dewey (1958, 2002) to highlight how actors' socialization into these frames co-occurs with their practical use of the associated cultural tools via a process of habituation. For Dewey, there is no strict antagonism between normative investments in and practical applications of culture in action, as both dimensions are intertwined in the formation of actors' habits: “our purposes and commands regarding action (whether physical or moral) come to us through the refracting medium of bodily and moral habits” (2002: 32), and habits “both form our effective desires and...furnish us with our working capacities” (2002: 25).

For Dewey (2002), the actors' individual habits of action are always embedded and developed within collective moral orders, “customs, folkways, established collective habits” (2002: 75). At the same time, moral orders only come to make sense and become phenomenologically real to actors as they gain greater practical competency with their practices. Dewey understands “morality” in the broad, Aristotelian sense of how one ought to live, which he describes as something worked out through *doing* rather than through the forced internalization of particular ideas from an “externally imposed and fostered” system (Dewey 2002: 232). As such, Dewey challenges what he regards as false dichotomies between means and ends as well as society and the individual: even as habitual practices are communally maintained and reproduced, they are simultaneously experienced and initiated by individuals as *purposive activity* intended to solve specific problems.

Rather than thinking of internalizing a norm as something that happens apart from and prior to the moment of action, then, we follow Dewey to highlight how ongoing involvement with a practice habituates actors not only to the practical skills undergirding apt performance (Bourdieu, 1992; Swidler, 2001) but also to the normative standards that define this very “aptness.” In other words, ongoing engagements with a cultural tool habituate actors not only to the tool's pragmatic uses (what can be done with it?) but also into the normative frames that constitute evaluations of that practice's appropriateness and effective implementation (how can it be done?).

## 3. Cases and methods

The original data analyzed here come from two independently conducted ethnographies of religious socialization in Evangelical communities. Both authors use pseudonyms for the names of people and organizations.

Author One's data come from 6 months of ethnographic observation of an Evangelical church in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN called *The Foundry*, fieldwork conducted as part of a larger project on the religious socialization of youth. The Foundry was established for the purposes of attracting teenagers and young adults to an Evangelical Christian community. The majority of The Foundry's members were white, with around 10 percent of the congregation identifying as Latino/Hispanic, Asian, or African-American (according to church statistics). Author One's fieldwork consisted primarily of observations of Friday evening worship services, weekly small group meetings, and conversations and interactions at more informal events such as coffee hours, potlucks, etc.

Author Two's data comes from a comparative study of Evangelical Christian and Sunni Muslim high schools in the New York City area. He spent a year and a half in the Evangelical school studied here, called *Good Tree*. Author Two had around 70 visits over three semesters to Good Tree, a suburban school with grades from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (though visits were exclusively at the high school). In a survey given to the approximately 200 students in the high school, a little less than half identified as white, ten percent as black or West Indian, seven percent as Latino, twenty-five percent as Asian, Asian-American, or Arab, and ten percent as mixed race. Most of Author Two's fieldwork consisted of classroom observations and interactions with students and faculty at lunch, school events, and after-school activities. While the ethnographies were conducted independently and for the purposes of different projects, the authors' extended discussions about their fieldwork led them to identify common patterns and questions, including how and why prayer was both a regular *solution to* and *source of* problems for Evangelicals.

In what follows, we analyze prayer through an exclusively cultural-sociological lens. We take a methodologically agnostic position on whether prayer works in the ways our Evangelical Christian interlocutors believe – that is, through the agency of an omnipotent God who acts in the world.

#### 4. Findings and analysis

We present our findings and analysis in three parts. First, we briefly describe central characteristics of prayer as practiced by Evangelicals in our sites and how the normative frame of sincerity is profoundly bound up with its meaning and form. In the second section, we document how sincerity in prayer enabled Evangelicals to use the practice to put it to strategic and effective use for a number of purposes. In the third section, we demonstrate how this same normative frame entailed the development of particular kinds of problematic concerns and dilemmas surrounding prayer itself. In the discussion and conclusion, we review other scholars' work to show how some of the same processes play out in other cases where there is a high regard for sincerity in cultural action, referencing romantic relationships and celebrity culture.

##### 4.1. "Just talking to god": sincerity in evangelical prayer

Within and across religious traditions, prayer is associated with different beliefs and takes particular forms. While we do not wish to argue for an essential definition of prayer that covers all its varied expressions, we note that one characteristic of prayer that tends to cut across many – if not all – traditions is that it is a type of interaction or communication with purported supernatural, nonhuman entities or actors (Cerulo & Barra, 2008; Riesebrodt, 2010). Prayer within our sites was most commonly understood and practiced as personal, intimate communication with God. For Evangelical Christians, God is not a distant power that exists at remove from the world; He is instead a person, and one who cares deeply about each individual who communicates with Him. "God cares about you as an individual," the head pastor at the Foundry said during a Friday night sermon, "He wants a personal relationship with you!"

Moreover, Evangelical prayer is understood as two-way communication. That is, if one sincerely talks to God, Evangelicals believe that God can "talk back." It is important to note that when Evangelicals in our cases talked about "hearing God's voice", they were usually not talking about hearing an audible voice. Instead, Evangelicals learned to interpret God's responses to them as part of their own cognitive and emotional patterns and "internal conversations" (see Luhrmann, 2012 for a detailed analysis). In other words, "God's voice" typically manifested itself as a pattern of thought or feeling that Evangelicals ascribed to a supernatural agency.

American Evangelicals often speak of prayer in ways that seem shockingly colloquial to an outsider. Teaching prayer as "just talking to God" was a common phrase we heard in both field sites, as was the statement that, in prayer, one should speak "straight from the heart" – i.e., that what is communicated to God should be nothing more or less than an honest expression of the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the person praying. For Evangelicals, communication with God ought to be – above all things – *sincere*. In other words, what is observable in the "objective" content and form<sup>1</sup> of one's prayers should be an accurate reflection of the "subjective" interiority of the self.

In their concern for sincerity in cultural praxis, these modern-day Evangelicals are not unique but the inheritors of an at-least five-century long Western preoccupation with sincerity that certain historians have argued began with the Protestant Reformation and quickly jumped the bounds of religion to influence secular culture as well. While historical and genealogical treatments of the Western preoccupation with sincerity can be found elsewhere (Magill, 2012; Trilling, 1972), our concern here is with how sincerity served as a normative frame for our subjects' prayer practice, influencing how contemporary Evangelicals came to learn about, enact, and evaluate prayer in everyday life. Indeed, the central importance of sincerity in prayer was regularly reinforced by teachers,

<sup>1</sup> While content refers to the *whats* of a cultural practice/tool – i.e., the substance of the meaning being signified – form refers to the *hows* – i.e., the perceptible, expressive "vehicles" through which content is communicated. With regard to prayer, the content of prayer would refer to what one prays for and about while the form would refer to the manner in which one prays – e.g., linguistic styles, bodily comportment, material environs and objects, etc.

pastors, and students in our sites, as demonstrated in the following interaction between Pastor Kyle, an associate pastor at The Foundry, and a collection of young adults during one of the church's biweekly small group meetings:

"God doesn't want your dusty old 'religious prayers,'" Pastor Kyle says, using air quotes around the phrase 'religious prayers.' As an example of these kinds of 'dusty prayers', he recites the beginning of the Lord's prayer in a dry, monotone, Ben Stein-like voice: "Our Father, Who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name..."

"How many of you said that prayer growing up, in your churches?" he asks. Several in the group raise their hands, and everyone chuckles a little as they look around at one another....Pastor Kyle says that we should speak to God in prayer like we would speak to someone with whom we were in a very close personal relationship..."No formulas," he says, "just open and honest talk. God wants to hear about what's on your heart"....

Students and teachers at Good Tree made similar points about the importance of sincerity in prayer. As a sophomore at Good Tree, Cindy, passionately explained to Author Two after a classroom conversation about prayer:

For me, I have to believe what I'm praying, so I don't like it when other people pray for me, like when they say 'We thank you for this day' because then I'm not really thanking God for this day, so I have to then tell God, "Lord, I do thank you for this day," because I have to mean it. That's why I don't like praying before we eat because all I'm thinking about is the food in front of me, and I'm not actually thinking about God, and so I don't feel like it counts as a prayer. I really have to feel like I'm totally into the prayer....

Such explanations exemplify how the normative frame of sincerity embeds evaluative standards within the practice of prayer itself, setting normative expectations for what it should look like and how it should be experienced. With regard to how prayer should look (i.e., its cultural form), the demand for sincerity dictates Evangelicals' prayers should be spontaneous and personal, not formal and ritualistic. As Pastor Kyle's somewhat mocking statement about praying in prescribed ways (e.g., the Lord's prayer) and Cindy's concerns about praying at prescribed times illustrate, for these Evangelicals, prayer is not about specific performance of formal rituals but about spontaneous expressions of the heart. Rather than emphasizing the importance of set, ritualized forms such as, for example, *du'a* in Islam, *shema* in Judaism, or the Rosary in Catholicism, many American Evangelicals valorize "open and honest talk" with God. Formal movements, prescribed language, and authoritative intercessors such as priests or saints were seen as not only unnecessary but also potential barriers to the kind of sincere communication endorsed by these Evangelical communities.

Sincerity also sets normative expectations for how prayer ought to be experienced. Note how often Cindy expresses how prayer only "counts" if she really feels and means it, implying that expressions of prayer that do not completely align with one's true desires, feelings, and intentions are in some sense not really prayers at all. These normative standards do not emerge out of nowhere, spontaneously from each situation. They are instead relatively consistent parts of Evangelical culture's focus on sincerity (see Keane, 2002), a normative frame that influences both how prayer should look and how it should be felt. As we show in the next two sections, these normative influences help enable Evangelicals to use prayer as a strategic "tool" to get particular things done in the world. But they also make prayer itself an ongoing concern to be addressed.

#### 4.2. Prayer's possibilities

While the primary purpose of prayer for Evangelicals was to build the believer's personal relationship with God, this spiritual relationship also had wider, more pragmatic uses in everyday life – "prayer changes things," in the words of a t-shirt some Good Tree students made for themselves. While, according to Evangelicals, prayer changes things because it enlists the supernatural agency of God, we focus on how the empirically observable characteristics of prayer detailed above made it readily available for a variety of purposes and in a number of settings. More specifically, the belief that God actively cares about peoples' personal lives coupled with the normative framing of prayer as nothing more or less than sincere expression enabled Evangelicals to regularly deploy prayer as part of their everyday cultural repertoires.

Personal decision-making was one area in which sincere prayer was commonly enlisted to address dilemmas and develop strategies of action. The Evangelicals in our study used prayer to help make life decisions such as where to go to college or what to do in their careers or simply to ask for help during stressful life events. During a small group meeting at the Foundry, 21-year-old Ben told Pastor Kyle and other members of the group about praying before an interview for an internship. Feeling very nervous about the situation, Ben told the group that he "...just kind of reached out to God and asked Him to help me through."

"And did He?," Pastor Kyle asked in response.

"Yeah," replied a smiling Ben. "I think I nailed it [the interview]!"

Ben's response was met with an enthusiastic "Amen!" from Pastor Kyle, and the rest of the group joined in with their own verbal affirmations. Pastor Kyle took the opportunity to elaborate on Ben's experience, saying it showed "our prayers don't have to be formal and floral; they can just be honest conversations that we have with God. 'Hey God, I could really use your help here.'"

After the group meeting, when the first author asked Ben about his experience of prayer and how he thought God had specifically intervened, he explained:

I had been hoping for an internship like this for months....It's the kind of thing that will really open doors for my career. But...I was feeling all of this pressure and anxiety – sweating, stomach ache, just a total wreck – and I was really worried I was going to blow the whole thing....So I just prayed out to God, "Hey, I'm really struggling here and could use your help." And I just kind of

focused my attention on Him and asked for His help...and I felt I heard Him say that everything was going to be fine, I'm going to love you no matter what, just be yourself, you know? And I immediately felt calmer and more confident....I walked in there feeling great and really impressed them as a result, I think.

As a devout Christian, Ben attributed the efficacy of his prayer to the supernatural intervention of a loving God; yet from our cultural-sociological lens, it is the case that his prayer could also be efficacious through social and symbolic means, altering the meaning of the situation and even one's relationship to oneself (Mead, 1934). The normative frame of sincerity not only enabled but encouraged Ben to perform prayer as an open and honest (interior) dialogue with a loving God, "praying out" his feelings of anxiety and fear. By "getting God's perspective" (another common Evangelical phrase) through prayer, Ben was able to imaginatively reflect on these feelings from the viewpoint of an unconditionally loving God over and against the potentially critical perspective of others, changing his interview from an anxiety-ridden affair to a situation in which he was able to act calmly and confidently.

Like Ben, other Evangelicals in our field sites used prayer as a tool to work on various elements of the self: to sooth anxieties, calm fears, cultivate confidence and self-control, etc. (2012a, Sharp, 2010). And, like Ben, the normative frame of sincerity encouraged them to treat prayer as an exercise in reflecting on, deciphering, articulating, and working through their mental and feeling states (with God). As Jaelyn, a young member of the Foundry many looked up to as an informal leader, explained it to a small group, "Prayer makes you face up to what's going on inside. When you pour your heart out to God [in prayer], it makes you honestly confront all those fears, hates, wounds that you've been carrying. And then you just give them over to God....You know, here you go! [makes an overhead tossing motion with both arms]."

Sincere prayer was not only an efficacious cultural tool for working on one's self, however; it was also used to shape relationships with others (Sharp, 2012b). Religious practices, as Durkheim noted long ago, are powerful ways to build and solidify community bonds, and prayer was an extremely useful tool for doing just that. Community members would "hold one another up in prayer" by collectively listening to and then praying for the struggles, anxieties, issues, and triumphs of their fellow community members. This meant that personal prayers often became collective concerns.

Author Two noted that many classes at Good Tree began with a collective prayer, as did weekly chapel services. These prayers nearly always repeated particular community concerns, such as the health of a parent or those students participating in the school's annual senior service trip to the Dominican Republic. In an interview, the Good Tree principal said prayer was very important to the school culture: "Staff meetings on Fridays, for the majority of it, it is just us as staff, praying for our kids. I will go through our grade levels, talk about some of the kids with needs, some of the ones who get praises, or just ones in the middle." Similarly, at the Foundry, small group meetings would usually close with each individual praying aloud about something in their lives – usually a personal trouble, problem, or success – and then other members of the group would be asked to pray about that issue on behalf of their fellow community member. Through sincere, heart-felt prayer, community members built intimate bonds not only with God but with each other via the disclosure and circulation of personal, self-revelatory information. As one member of the Foundry, Anna, commented, "[Through prayer] I've shared more of my life with people in this community than I have with my own family. It's just awesome to build that kind of support, you know?"

Recognizably sincere prayer could also be a way to evaluate and modify members' status in the group. In the second author's first semester at Good Tree, there was a senior named Jarrod who often slept in class and rarely participated in discussion. Teachers and fellow students were frustrated with his lack of seriousness. So it was quite dramatic when, by the end of the school year, Jarrod had become a much more popular student, with both teachers and students commenting on how much he had changed for the better. How did they know Jarrod had changed? Teachers and students mentioned a number of factors: he was kinder; he played with kids; he sang during worship; and, interestingly enough, he now *closed his eyes during prayers*. The second author asked a group of girls why this was such a big deal, and one girl, Sonja, responded, "I'm in praise band, so I see everything. I see when people don't pay attention or when they're really not into it, and this time, I could see that he was into it." In this case, Jarrod's closed eyes was not only a way to enact the normative frame of sincerity within himself. Closing his eyes was also a signal to others that his prayer life had become more sincere as well. Another student, Ebuwa, agreed. "When your eyes are closed, you can only think about yourself, your problems, and God. So, I mean, it's just easier to tell [if someone really means it]." Through his perceived performance of sincere prayer, among other behavioral changes, Jarrod changed his once peripheral status within the group in relatively rapid fashion. He also showed how the normative frame of sincerity provided a means of not only successfully deploying the cultural tool but also of evaluating it—in others as well as in oneself.

Sonja and Ebuwa's distinction between those who mean it and those who don't speaks to how sincerity helped enable another strategic use of prayer highlighted by recent scholars of religion: demarcating and negotiating collective identity boundaries (Braunstein, Fulton, & Wood, 2014; Lichterman, 2005; McRoberts, 2005). Among Evangelicals in our communities, their normative understandings of prayer as sincere communication with God was one of the more salient markers of their collective Evangelical identity. In some cases, this meant the way they prayed was used to make important distinctions between themselves and other Christian traditions and communities. These distinctions were even enrolled into the performance of the prayers themselves. During a closing prayer at the end of a Friday night sermon, for example, Foundry Pastor Terry stated, "Lord, we just want to reach out to you tonight...We don't want to be like those who pray in vain repetitions, who pray without heart. We just want you to hear what's on our hearts and let you into our lives." Pastor Terry's prayer was a message addressed to God on behalf of the community and a commentary on the night's sermon, yet it was also a strategic practice of boundary-making and collective self-definition, marked by both an implicit and an explicit normative framing of what prayer as a cultural practice ought and ought not to entail (sincere and spontaneous speech vs. the perceived "vain repetitions" of formal prayer rituals). Even Pastor Terry's use of the adverb "just" within his prayer – "We just want to reach out to you...; We just want you to hear" – both enacts and models the normative frame of sincerity

in prayer, communicating that what is being said is nothing more or less than the community's true desire for open, intimate communication with God.

#### 4.3. Prayer problems

Evangelicals in our field sites used prayer as a cultural tool to address individual life troubles and decisions, build and evaluate community relationships, and engage in collective identity work. These pragmatic uses of prayer were in significant part enabled by a normative frame of sincerity that set parameters for how prayer should be performed, experienced, and evaluated. Yet both authors found this very same normative demand could also create problems for Evangelicals' prayer practice, especially surrounding the sometimes vexed and opaque relationship between prayer's external form and the praying subject's internal states.

As mentioned above, the normative understanding that prayer should be sincere led Evangelicals to prioritize spontaneity and informality. This way of praying was regularly contrasted with a perceived "empty" ritualism in other religious traditions. Contemporary Evangelicals' anti-ritualism is of course part of a long history of skepticism toward ritual forms within Protestant Christianity (2007, Keane, 2002), but some modern Evangelical communities can be quite radical in their suspicions. The Foundry, for example, went so far as to claim to be "anti-religion," making a distinction between religion/religiousness – i.e., the outward institutions, rituals, and rules created by humans – and the intimate, sincere relationship with God they saw themselves developing. While the teachers and students at Good Tree did not go this far, members of both communities perceived ritualized forms of prayer as ossified barriers to the kind of sincere communication with God they desired. Part of the reason Good Tree's principal did not explicitly *require* prayer before class was precisely because of this concern that it would become just another ritual and lose its spontaneous, expressive power.

Yet while Evangelicals' valorization of an anti-ritualized sincerity made prayer easily approachable and ready-to-hand in some instances (what, after all, could be simpler than "just talking to God"?), in other contexts, this same normative frame also led to a series of new conundrums surrounding the inescapable outward forms through which prayers must be learned and expressed. As Keane (2007) argues, the communication of even the most seemingly personal, private, and subjective "inner states" still must be expressed through some kind of external form, if nothing else through language and the body. Evangelicals therefore had to deal with the problem that even sincere and spontaneous expressions of "the heart" could ultimately become "empty," ritualized forms of speech and behavior, leading to the difficult irony of harshly judging performances of prayer (their own and others) based on the same normative frames that empowered the performances in the first place.

Part of a discussion from a small group meeting at The Foundry illustrates these dynamics. The meeting's topic was "How to Cultivate your Prayer Life." Church members discussed how to make their conversations with God more intimate, frequent, and impactful. Several people suggested praying at a similar time – e.g., before dinner – or place – e.g., alone in one's bedroom – in order to make more time and space for talking to God in everyday life. But, as Pastor Kyle wrote all of this down on a whiteboard, Jaelyn interjected to say it can be a problem to pray at the same places and times because prayer can "become empty" – "just something you do out of habit." Another member, Hailey, agreed, saying that even though she still prayed before every meal and at night, that it was important not to "just pray during those times" lest one's prayer relationship with God become "empty" and rote. "You have to make sure you come to God whenever, wherever you need Him," she said.

While this is a short snippet of interaction, it highlights how the normative frame of sincerity leads to specific kinds of concerns about prayer's performance: even the seemingly benign traditions of praying before dinner or bedtime every evening had the potential to transform sincere expressions of the heart into "empty habits." Moreover, it brings out a paradoxical tension that can arise between the pragmatics of prayer and the normative standards that frame it: for Evangelicals, prayer is a tool you can and should use often, even something you should actively "cultivate" as part of your relationship with God; at the same time, repeated patterns of use always entail a greater danger that one's prayers would "devolve" into empty rituals. In short, the more Evangelicals became habituated to the cultural tool of prayer in everyday life (a good thing, to be encouraged), the more they had to worry about the danger of ritualization (a bad thing, to be avoided). Evangelicals in our respective field sites constantly admonished themselves (and each other) to make sure they "really mean it" and were not "just going through the motions."

The normative frame of sincerity also entailed a heightened concern not just about "really meaning it" in the moment but also with the *temporal* quality of young Evangelicals' desires and intentions in prayer – e.g., when do you really mean it? And for what reasons? On one hand, because Evangelicals understand prayer as sincere communication with an unconditionally loving deity, there was no problem deemed too insignificant about which they could talk to God. But, according to our interlocutors, praying for God to intervene in mundane, personal matters also implied a hidden danger: that one could start praying *hypocritically* – i.e., utilizing the practice in a self-serving and manipulative manner. In an interview, a sophomore girl at Good Tree provided an example:

"...let's say I have a big test and I'm just like "Oh, I need to pass this test." ... like you haven't been praying all week, like "I'm just asking your strength, help me study, help me do this and that." You're just like on the spot..." "I need to pass this test." Like "God, do that for me." You know? I don't think God works like that.

This warning that one ought to pray for the right reasons and with the right intentions showed up regularly in our interviews and field notes, illustrating how sincerity leads to a prayer paradox that was somewhat unresolvable: you can ask God for anything, but you simultaneously must never feel like you're *using* God for anything. One should not think that God "is your spiritual ATM," as Pastor Terry at the Foundry stated: "Put your 'prayer card' in and get some goodies out." In the most instrumental understanding of culture as a toolkit, this would not be a problem: people use the tool of prayer when they perceive it will work and choose a different tool when it does not. Yet such a purely pragmatic approach violates the normative frame of sincerity as it suggests that the praying subject only "means it" when it is convenient, raising questions about hidden motives and dishonest self-presentation.

The normative demand for sincerity also created anxieties about praying in public. While prayer was modeled after sincere interaction with an intimate, it was also routinely a public performance done in front of other members of the community. Praying together or being asked to lead the group in prayer was something that happened regularly at both the school and the church, and praying in front of others was a notable concern for some individuals in our sites. For example, the second author observed that while there were several students at Good Tree who were enthusiastic about volunteering to lead collective prayers in class, many others were hesitant. When the author asked a teacher, Ms. James, about this, she explained:

you know just the eyes and the other people in the classroom—that maybe intimidates them from praying out loud. Or maybe their faith isn't as strong and maybe they don't pray at home or something and praying out loud in a group would just be torturous for them almost....Or they just feel other people will feel that they didn't do a good job praying.”

In some ways, this type of performance anxiety is likely present for any public action related to group identity. But the difference with Evangelicals is that prayer is not supposed to be something that one has to learn – for them, prayer is not a structured form of speech and behavior one has to imitate but a personalized and spontaneous expression of one's own inner thoughts, feelings, and desires. As such, prayer anxiety could be chalked up to being an introvert or simply misunderstanding what is required, as Ms. James herself suggested later in the conversation. She said that in those situations in which students are anxious about leading prayer, she encouraged them to be natural: “they think they have to have all these big words to say but not really, just, ‘God this is what's up.’ You know?”

But our observations suggested that problems surrounding public prayer were more complicated. While Ms. James claimed there were no formal requirements for apt prayer performance beyond a sincere heart, it was also clear that this made the perceived sincerity of an individual's prayer an object of collective evaluation. This was made clear, for example, by Ms. Brown, the school secretary at Good Tree, who happened to enter the second author's conversation with Ms. James. Ms. Brown described a student whose prayer especially inspired her:

You know, I am thinking of one boy in particular. When I hear this boy pray I am like right before the throne [of God]. I could cry. He is just – and it's not put on...– like you feel like you stepped into this intimate time between him and the Lord. And he's not showy, very humble, very quiet, but it's beautiful. It invokes that kind of a sense of, “Wow you've got it. You definitely talk to the Lord a lot” and you can hear it. It's intimate, it's personal, you know me and you get to see a little window [into] that and he's just a kid.

That this student so inspired Ms. Brown is another important example of how prayer can work as a cultural tool to inspire other Christians and develop a stronger community. Yet Ms. Brown's insights about the student—that you can tell he “definitely talk[s] to the Lord a lot” – indicated a reason why praying in public was also a problem. The opacity of the relationship between inner states and outer forms meant that Evangelicals subjected not only their own but others' prayers to evaluative standards regarding how accurately the outward expression indexed the “inner heart”. Not showing any emotion in one's speech, for example, could be seen as evidence of not really meaning one's prayers. However, too much bombast and emotion – to be “showy” in prayer, as Ms. Brown phrased it – could be taken as evidence that one was overcompensating and putting on spiritual airs. Given this, it was little wonder some individuals in our sites expressed hesitancy and anxiety about how their prayer performances would be judged by others.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion: practices beyond prayer and frames beyond sincerity

The empirical question motivating this study was why prayer was both a solution to and a source of problems for Evangelical Christians. In our field sites, Evangelicals used prayer as a strategy of action to create and strengthen communal bonds, demarcate identities, and cultivate feelings of certainty, calm, and safety. Yet it also confronted them with new kinds of dilemmas regarding the practice itself, especially surrounding the relationship between outward forms and inner desires. We found these possibilities and dilemmas of prayer in action were intimately conjoined, both stemming from a normative frame of prayer as, above all else, sincere communication with God.

While our findings necessarily emerge from the empirical cases at hand, we argue our focus on the paradoxes of sincerity and the general concept of “normative frames” has relevance for sociological studies of culture-in-action beyond our case study. The analytic distinction between cultural tools and their normative frames, for example, makes room for comparative investigations examining the consequences of the same normative frame for otherwise disparate cultural practices. As mentioned earlier, the normative demand and desire for sincerity is not relegated to prayer alone but is a frame shared by a number of different (and often secular) cultural practices in the modern West (Magill, 2012). Here, we briefly examine practices surrounding romance and celebrity.

For romance, it is often extremely important for people to “mean it” when they express love or devotion, to “really feel that way” and not “just be saying it.” Similarly, regarding celebrities, fans ask “is she actually nice or smart [or any other trait] or is that just how she acts for the cameras?” Celebrities themselves, meanwhile, struggle to “express themselves” through their art despite demands, often quite literally, to act like someone else, both on camera or onstage and in other public venues as well.

Like prayer, we can observe how sincerity a) normatively frames these practices through cultural understandings about how they ought to be enacted and experienced and b) how these assumptions help produce similar kinds of paradoxes for action. With regard to romance, Swidler has demonstrated how middle-class Americans are not “passive victims” (2001: 111) of romance culture but instead pragmatically use the discourse of romantic love as a cultural tool to address problems the fateful decisions of marriage and divorce inevitably introduce – i.e., how do I decide whether this is “the one” with whom I should form an enduring, monogamous bond, and how do I know when it might be time to end such a relationship?

Practicing the discourse of romantic love, Swidler argues, provides a meaningful strategy of action for negotiating a contradiction at the heart of modern marriage: marriage must be at once freely chosen and a permanent commitment. And what can secure such a commitment better than a rhetoric that enables a “honing [of] the capacity to identify one other person as the person whom one loves

and to know that this relationship is ‘it’ (2001: 201)? We agree, but we also add that a significant part of what enables this capacity to identify “the one” is a normative frame of romantic love *as sincere* – i.e., that “the one” is the person to whom I can bare my soul (and vice-versa) and that our romantic relationship is thus defined by honest and enduring affection. The “tools” of romantic love (e.g., flowers, love letters, gifts) are not in themselves enough to identify nor experience romance; actors are also evaluating these romantic performances in terms of their sincerity – “do they really mean it?”

While sincerity provides normative grounds for skillfully identifying and evaluating romance, we need not cast modern romantic actors as “passive victims” to entertain the possibility that their involvement may also implicate them in dilemmas that parallel some of the problems we find in Evangelicals’ prayer lives. Again, our notion of subject formation here is Deweyan rather than Parsonian: we are not suggesting that culture is “downloaded” into actors but rather that repeated, agentic use of certain cultural tools also strengthens the normative frames that undergird them. When we recognize how romantic love as a cultural tool both depends upon and strengthens certain normative frames (e.g., sincerity), then it is easier to explain why the perceived waxing and waning of special feelings of intimacy and passion in oneself or one’s romantic partner necessarily become objects of focal concern. The perceived presence or absence of sincerity in romantic practice itself becomes an ongoing problem to be interpreted and evaluated. Going beyond the problems generated for individual couples, one might even argue, following Coontz (2005) that this focus on romantic love as the index of a worthwhile relationship (or what we would call its normative frame) has not just responded to but helped create some of the instabilities and contradictions Swidler and others (Cherlin, 2010) identify in the modern institution of marriage.

Practices surrounding celebrity are also normatively framed by expectations of sincerity: fans regularly evaluate whether stars’ performances align with who they “really are” and how they “truly feel,” and fans and celebrities themselves are concerned that the relationship between artforms and identities be “authentic” (Tolson, 2001). Meyers (2009) argues that celebrity fans seek to know “the inner truth” behind a star’s performance, and that the perceived alignment between external performance and interior personhood is part of what makes celebrities appear “authentic” and thus worthy of praise by their fans (Meyers 2009: 895). Sincerity is therefore an important normative frame that provides a context to adjudicate both how famous people themselves engage with the cultural tools of celebrity, as well as how fans evaluate celebrities and use celebrity as a tool to construct a meaningful social life. But, like prayer and romance, sincerity helps make celebrity status itself an object of concern for fans and stars alike. For example, Gamson describes how certain fans themselves are often anxious to gather more information about their celebrity heroes, provided what they learn does not challenge the “overall backdrop of authenticity” (Gamson 1994: 171).

Analytically distinguishing between cultural tools and normative frames not only allows for investigations of how the same frame influences otherwise disparate practices. It also allows for examinations of how different normative frames can differentially shape the same practice. For example, the Catholic (D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Gautier, 2007), Jewish (Tavory, 2016: 60–77), or Muslim (O’Brien, 2017: 50–77) experience of certain forms of prayer can often be rooted more in a normative frame of tradition rather than sincerity, even if, in the United States, an increasing emphasis on sincerity is affecting how these rituals are understood and performed in various religious traditions (Seligman & Weller, 2008). For these kinds of prayers, performing the practice within specific pre-established forms is much more important than ensuring one is in a particular mental and emotional register. While accomplishing the prayers with sincerity may be a worthy goal, it is not an *a priori* requirement as it would be for many Evangelicals. However, while the more scripted and ritualized character of “traditional prayer” avoids some of the Evangelical anxieties surrounding sincere expression, this does not mean that traditional prayer is devoid of its own problems and creative possibilities. As Tavory and Winchester (2012) show, traditional prayer (and other “orthoprax” rites) can over time lead to anxieties that actors’ experiences of these practices have become overly routinized and mundane, leading them to seek out strategic – but still tradition-bound – ways to reenchant their ritual lives.

A parallel distinction can be made between conceptions of romantic vs. arranged (often called “traditional”) marriages. While it may be considered *better* if people have or eventually develop a sincere affection for the spouse as a lover and friend, the normative framing surrounding the cultural toolkit of arranged marriage is much more one of traditional devotion and obligation than sincerity (Applbaum, 1995; Bradby, 1999). Similarly, Gamson’s study of celebrity does not only engage fans who look to identify an authentic connection between a celebrity’s outer performance and inner states. He describes how certain fans have entirely different “interpretive strategies” (1994: 146): besides “sincere” fans, there are also second-order traditionalists, postmodernists, gossipers, and detectives, all of whom are still deeply engaged with similar practices of celebrity life but who use radically different examples of what we would call normative frames through which to evaluate and understand those same practices and experiences.

One can imagine many other permutations of normative frames and cultural tools, and these possibilities for difference are a rich source of conflict that could benefit from further sociological analysis. For example, two businesswomen might enter into the cultural practice of a business deal. The first woman might do so via the normative frame of integrity, seeking to make sure everything is done with openness and transparency, while the second woman might enter into the same business deal with the normative frame of a “hustle”, trying to trick the first woman out of as much money as possible. Both businesswomen might be using the same cultural tool, but their normative framework for initiating the tool—and their means of gauging its relative success—would be radically different.

Finally, our study provides a contribution to and subtle twist on Merton’s influential account of unintended consequences, in that we demonstrate that it is not always *ignorance or error* in the face of complexity that make for unanticipated outcomes of action. Instead, this research shows that sometimes it is very deeply ingrained *knowledge of* normative expectations surrounding action that make for unanticipated dilemmas.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This focus is more similar to Merton’s take on the unanticipated consequences of values-motivated behavior (1936: 903), though our emphasis is more Deweyan than Weberian, pointing to how certain normative commitments cause unanticipated problems connected to the practices themselves rather than for future actions.

While contemporary studies of culture in action originated in a turn away from the Parsonian treatment of culture as the deep internalization of norms and toward a focus on the pragmatics of culture, our study suggests the value of reintegrating the normative and pragmatic dimensions – but a reintegration inspired by Goffman and Dewey more so than Parsons. Normative frames – cultural understandings of how a practice/tool should be performed and experienced – exist not in a moral realm distinct from practice but within and alongside the strategic deployment of culture in action. This insight also adds to the emerging literature on how culture not only solves but can also create problems for action, demonstrating that the enabling and problematic features of a cultural tool can sometimes be two sides of the same coin. Normative frames suggest how and when a tool ought to be put to strategic use but can simultaneously make the proper use and experience of the tool itself a source of anxiety and concern.

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