



Narrating and naming positive agents Storytelling by Philadelphia postwar political elite[☆]

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Abstract

This paper connects research in social psychology, psycholinguistics, and discourse analysis to develop two hypotheses about character description. Interviews conducted in the late 1970s with political elites of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA confirm predictions. Speakers describe co-group members as praiseworthy agents disproportionately, in comparison to out-group members, and refer to co-group members with individually specific language disproportionately. Extrapolating from research of similar practices in other contexts, the author explains why these two patterns may be important to identity formation. Images of positive agents are central to collective identity, so repeated stories portraying group members as such would reinforce those identities. Social psychological research suggests that specific, individual naming draws attention away from group identity; explicit group naming does the opposite. The use of individually specific names, rather than group names, may therefore mask the symbolic power created by the stories' repeated descriptions of co-group members as positive agents. The language practice is both ubiquitous and opaque; it is common, and its power emerges from the aggregation of very short utterances. The combined practices of "narrating and naming" may exemplify the kind of misrecognition imagined by Pierre Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]). Together, these practices can reproduce or challenge social inequalities without being acknowledged for doing so.

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1. Introduction

Over the 20th century, collective identities have increasingly become taken for granted in the United States (Foucault, 1988). That is, there are lively public debates about what names are most appropriate for certain groups (for example American-Indian, Native-American, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Queer, Lesbian/gay/bisexual, developmentally disabled, etc.) and struggles over which identities apply to whom. Social scientists and historians have probed how particular

[☆] I use the word narrating in the title and in various parts of the text to draw attention to the act of interpretation involved in any storyteller's speech. I do not intend to specifically address the research on "narratives" as comprehensive texts.

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identities emerge and how individuals employ them (Haney-López, 1996; Waters, 1999). But investigation and theory about the processes which form and maintain group identities are more rare. How do people get the sense that a collective identity exists in the first place, and that there are certain people who share it? Fredrickson's (2002) history of a worldwide transformation from fluid religious boundaries to more biologically essential racial boundaries is one such account over a centuries-long time frame. Social scientists are more likely to look for and find collective identities' roots in individual daily practices (Goffman, 1961; Lamont, 2000).

Bourdieu (1977) argued that language is particularly important in creating and re-creating social classifications. Yet most social science research and literary theory has failed to adequately explore language's contribution to collective identities (beyond attention to particular group names). Existing studies of identity communication through language generally focus on structures of "narratives" as relatively large, content-based sections of life stories (Bearman and Stovel, 2000; Smith, 2006; White, 1978, 1992). For example, Bearman and Stovel (2000) illustrate how narratives can be understood as "networks of elements." This paper innovates with quantitative content analysis to look at smaller, subtle text elements which have largely escaped the notice of most narrative scholars: the repetition of and language choice in character-development statements.

The study of literature and narrative helps us realize that conversation develops characters. To develop specific hypotheses and methods about language and identity in character development, this paper fuses research from discourse analysis and social psychology (as encouraged by van Dijk, 1997). Discourse analysis assumes that the prevalence of small elements, such as particular types of sentences, contributes to an audience's interpretation. Its text-counting methods are particularly appropriate for studying relative frequencies of small speech parts relevant to character definition (Franzosi, 2004; Linde, 1986; Tomlin et al., 1997).

Sociological and social psychological theory and research on identity suggest what to look for in these conversational elements (Cerulo, 1997; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The paper's first hypothesis – developed and tested successfully – is that speakers recounting events in a community's past will describe in-group members as more agentic and judge them more positively than out-group members. Social science researchers have found that a sense that group members take action and do so in positive ways is crucial to the existence of collective identity (see Cerulo, 1997). Once aggregated, story characters become shared images of peoples (rather than only individual people) with particular collective identities. I therefore look specifically at how storytellers compile reports and evaluations of characters' actions.

The related hypothesis supported by the analysis in this paper is that speakers recounting events in a community's past will individually name third-person in-group actors more than out-group actors. Sociological and psychological studies of language-use draw attention to speakers' alternate use of nouns and pronouns to refer to characters (Bernstein, 1971; Maass et al., 1996).

Finally, the paper offers suggestions of both causes and effects of such a naming pattern in character references, though neither can be tested here. Both social proximity and the desire to downplay privilege may encourage elites, such as those investigated in this study, to refer to characters by individual rather than group names. And no matter what the cause, the effect may be that the storytelling practice of creating a sense of positive agency (Hypothesis 1) becomes less visible to participants (not tested) with the use of individual names as referents (Hypothesis 2). Speakers' choices of explicit references such as individual names or implicit references such as pronouns (only understood in context) may do subtle identity work. The use of explicit group names for subjects is likely to draw an audience's attention to the practice of identity formation through storytelling. Conversely, the use of individual proper names or pronouns is less likely to

be noticed as an act of dramatization or interpretation which – through speech itself – creates a sense of a group.

2. Literature review

2.1. Character management and identity formation

Management of “referents” – the people or objects – is central to any speaker’s control of information (Tomlin et al., 1997). At the individual level, characters develop as actions are attributed to particular human referents (Barthes, 1975: 258).¹ At the social level, collective identity forms, in part, with the development of “a conscious sense of *group as agent*” (Cerulo, 1997).

In aggregate, stories’ descriptions of individual group members’ past actions can create this sense of collective agency.² A simple description of an action includes a subject and a verb. When someone hears such a description, she or he may learn that this subject (or referent) has the power to do this kind of action. If multiple actions are described, in which the subjects share certain characteristics, an audience is led to understand that this “type” of actor has some agency.³

Collective-identity-formation also involves, according to sociologists and social psychologists, communicating evaluations of in-groups as better than out-groups. Cerulo (1997: 393–394) summarizes, “that which frames the collective identity defines their existence as right and good.”⁴ Social psychologists have found, accordingly, that in experimental settings individuals extend positive self-evaluations (which preserve self-esteem) to positive valuation of group memberships (Deaux, 1993).⁵ The stories a speaker tells, therefore, are likely to include more positive evaluations of in-group members than out-group members.

Hypothesis 1. Speakers recounting events in a community’s past (a) will describe in-group characters as more agentic and (b) will judge them more positively than out-group characters.

Corollary 1a.1. *This prediction is particularly strong for powerful groups such as elites analyzed here because they may become accustomed to their own power. Members of less dominant groups, though also likely to describe their co-members as agentic, may do so to a*

¹ Barthes (1975) devotes a large section of his introduction to the structural analysis of narrative to the relationships between character and action. There is not room to discuss the many definitions of agency in the scope of this paper. For a long discussion and innovative argument see Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

² My sense of “group” is from a subfield of social psychology which calls “social identity” the extent to which individuals see themselves as members of groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), as might result from storytelling that “stresses the likenesses or shared attributes around which members coalesce” (Cerulo, 1997: 386). The symbiotic relation between agency and identity is manifest in the copious research on “new social movements” and movements of industrial working classes. Both areas of study specifically question identities’ impacts on collective action.

³ This sense of collective agency may emerge from action descriptions even if a particular group is not named. Before hearing these descriptions, a listener may have chosen from any number of characteristics by which to define a group. After hearing the stories, however, the characteristics shared by the subjects of the actions may become more salient in our attempt to classify people.

⁴ Cerulo links identity to agency by expanding Taylor’s (1985, 1989) theories of the individual to the collective.

⁵ The combination of group-formation and evaluation through language is nicely illustrated by Snow and Anderson’s (1987) study of how the homeless talk about self and identity in ways that bring them self-worth and dignity. Homeless people studied by Snow and Anderson (1987: 1355–1356) embraced particular street roles such as “tramp” or “bum” and expressed pride in being an “expert dumpster diver.”

lesser extent because they have become accustomed to their relative lack of power, or they may describe themselves as just as or more agentic by focusing on other sources of power. Less dominant groups may also emphasize other, more powerful group members' agency because of the greater mental attention they give to the more powerful, a tendency captured by Du Bois' concept of dual consciousness (Du Bois, 1989 [1903]). The examination of storytelling by political elites here allows for an initial articulation and test of a group expected to focus on its own agency.

Corollary 1a.2. According to social psychologists, first-person plural pronouns (*we, us*) are particularly prevalent and effective markers of shared identity (Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker et al., 2003; Simmons et al., 2005; Stone and Pennebaker, 2002). Because the narrator is clearly a member of any of her or his own groups, use of "I" and "we" as agents adds to the portrayal of co-group members as agentic. A listener knows exactly which group's agency is being reinforced when the group referred to by "we" is explicit. When the "we" reference is implicit, however, a listener is likely to assume that "we" refers to the same types of people who are the more common agents in the larger text.

2.2. Identity and naming

The words speakers use to refer to people in their stories direct how listeners track them. Pennebaker et al. (2003) argue that the use of pronouns, in place of nouns, provides especially important social cues.⁶ A speaker's use of individual names, rather than third-person plural pronouns or group names, may also reduce attention to a referent's *group* membership. Conversely, the use of group or abstract names draws attention to group identity. In the field, Mische (2003) noticed that contemporary Brazilian student activists were employing such a strategy when they spoke with general rather than particularistic references to enhance group cohesion.

A speaker personally familiar with the characters in her or his stories is more likely than one who is not to refer to them with individual names (with the exception of very well-known figures). Groups, such as elites, with tight social networks are especially likely to tell stories using the names of particular members of their groups.

Bernstein (1971: 137), who argued it was "imperative that sociologists recognize in their analyses the fact that man speaks," initiated decades of inquiry into group differences in language use. Bernstein described previously unobserved patterns in speech by class. The crucial difference between what he called "elaborated" and "restricted" codes is related to the use of nouns and pronouns. These codes distinguish whether speakers make references explicit or leave them implicit (see also Hasan, 1971). An explicit reference – like a proper name – is one that does not require prior knowledge between the speaker and listener; an implicit reference – like a pronoun – does. In Bernstein's conception, members of any group may have more than one code at their fingertips, but in comparison with members of another group in the same context, they will tend to employ one more than the other. Bernstein and his predecessors looked extensively at language-use patterns in parenting and personal relationships, but they left discussions of history, and even to some extent personal narratives, unexamined (Bernstein, 1971; Bernstein et al., 1995; Pennebaker et al., 2003). Yet Bernstein's (1971) focus on reference clarity leads us to expect that

⁶ Understanding that proper nouns are more precise than nouns, Tomlin et al. (1997) understand a speaker's choice to use names rather than pronouns as a decision to provide more clarity about who the person or object is.

storytellers might selectively employ abstract and particular referents in systematically different ways.

Research on naming and identity in social psychology indicates that speakers do choose strategically to call a character by abstract or specific names, depending on that person's group membership. (This happens in experiments, when the subject is no more familiar with the individual names of one group than another.) Social psychologists have found that speakers disproportionately use abstract language,⁷ which calls attention to group membership, to describe in-group members considered responsible for a positive result, and for out-group members considered responsible for a negative result (Maass et al., 1996). A contemporary U.S. Republican Congress person, therefore, might talk about popular "Republican" removal of estate taxes and unpopular "Democratic" attempts at providing immigrants amnesty. Conversely, specific individual referents, such as names of people or organizations, convey that an action was idiosyncratic rather than representative of group action (Maass et al., 1996). Because specific language removes attention from group membership, speakers use it to describe in-group individuals doing something negative and out-group individuals doing something positive. The same Republican Congress person, therefore, will talk about "George W. Bush's" currently unpopular war on Iraq and attribute any popular Democratic policies to individuals like "Nancy Pelosi" or "Barack Obama." These different lines of research can lead to several predictions about speakers' employment of names and pronouns. This study examines whether speakers' systematically use individual names when describing actions of co-group members versus actions of out-group members, *ceteris paribus*.⁸

Hypothesis 2. Speakers recounting events in a community's past will individually identify third-person in-group actors more than out-group actors.

In Section 2.1, I argued that stories aggregate statements about in-group characters' past actions and positive evaluations of that action. And my data analysis will show support for that prediction. In the beginning of this section, I developed the hypothesis that speakers are more likely to individually name co-group member agents than out-group member agents because of social proximity. I finish the literature review by using existing research to suggest possible significant impacts of the practices in combination (though I do not test them in my data analysis).⁹

In the case of everyday storytelling, using an individual name for a character may not suggest that the person was acting idiosyncratically (as social psychologists suggest it does in their experimental studies). Instead of diminishing the impact of the repeated stories of in-group member action on a sense of collective identity, individual naming might just make that active process of group-identity-formation through storytelling less visible. For example, in U.S. grade schools, the prevalent accounts of individual white male inventors, explorers, writers and statesmen teach children that white men tend to achieve and others do not. In contrast, the language of categories, or group names, such as "the founding fathers" makes the group-

⁷ Abstract or group names can increase focus on categories. Abstract references might include pronouns such as "we" or "they;" group names such as "the people," "the reformers," or "the businessmen;" or roles such as "civil servants" or "construction workers."

⁸ This study does not differentiate different tendencies in different contexts, nor does it try to distinguish the particular cause of this pattern here.

⁹ This is also described briefly above as a possible cause (other than social proximity) especially for members of powerful groups to refer to co-group members with individual rather than group names.

identity-formation process more visible. This use of the language of categories to identify an abstract group makes the active construction of group identity more noticeable.

Unlike the more prevalent research on how the less powerful politicize identities to make them more salient, research on whiteness finds that certain practices actually hide the white identity, which accompanies privilege. Whites in the United States tend to downplay their racial identity (Thandeka, 1999). Even without most of its members explicitly claiming rights of membership, whiteness survives as an identity, and many whites experience its privileges.¹⁰ Dominant group-member practices such as the failure to explicitly call people “white,” in comparison to a readiness to call people “black,” are part of this visibility-reducing pattern (Thandeka, 1999).¹¹

Barthes (1975) described writing styles as involving different levels of “dramatization” about writers’ own power. He referred to the degree of a text’s conformance to what is culturally expected as its readability. The more readable a text is, the more natural it seems. The less readable the text, the more attention the writer draws to his own creative involvement. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]) similarly paid attention to the recognizability of power in language. They argued that language reproduces social inequalities particularly well when not acknowledged as being so powerful. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]) theorized that misrecognition of objective truth is crucial to how cultural practices reproduce social orders. By acting quietly, “symbolic violence” may gain even more power from its own “misrecognition.” That is, symbolic violence inflicts its wounds on the socially dominated, in part, by taking an unrecognizable form. In this case the violence may be unrecognizable because of the storytellers’ use of individual, proper names rather than group names. Thus the practice examined as Hypothesis 2 might obscure the overall power of the repeated stories of in-group members’ action (examined as Hypothesis 1). Following these insights of Barthes and Bourdieu, the important difference, for social theorists, between the practice of group- and individual naming tested here may be that explicit group naming makes participants (speakers and listeners) conscious of how everyday storytelling creates collective identities.

3. Data

3.1. Case background

I focus my attention on retrospective accounts of policy-makers in power in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from 1952 to 1965.¹² As in other northeastern cities, these self-labeled reformers took power as deindustrialization, suburbanization, and a decaying infrastructure saddled the city with development challenges. They began their rule when Joseph Clark was elected mayor in 1952 and maintained power during the term of his successor, Richardson Dilworth (1956–1962). Many of those who held government positions were tied to the old business elite (Baltzell, 1958), but a significant group of civil servants with a particular reverence for planning, who saw

¹⁰ Whiteness is often more visible to American blacks than to whites (McDermott and Samson, 2005: 247–248).

¹¹ Similarly, late 20th century U.S. elites are particularly likely to want to emphasize their connection with mass public rather than other elites to avoid a perception as either aloof or as acting in their own interests. When referring to similar characters in their own pasts, therefore, I would especially expect them to use individual names rather than to use group names.

¹² Though they did not control the mayor’s office after 1962, they still remained in many important positions in city government for the first few years of Tate’s administration.

themselves as young challengers to the old establishment, were the primary advocates of development policy.

Local political elites, like the ones studied here, tend to share strong, overlapping personal and institutional connections. Baltzell (1958, 1987 [1964]) showed how, at the local level in Philadelphia – and increasingly on the national level – incorporation into the American aristocracy has meant entry into dense social networks. Patterns of interaction maintained by overlapping social cliques and organizational memberships create class cohesion (Domhoff, 1970). Policy-makers' familiarity with one another, resulting in part from their overlapping networks as investigated by Baltzell (1958), Domhoff (1970) and Useem (1978, 1984), may encourage them to tell stories about one another's actions and to refer to one another by name (as explained in the literature review).

I examine stories Philadelphia political elites told about urban redevelopment, which was one of their major priorities. From the interviews studied here, an observer would be barely aware of dissatisfaction with the power-brokers' actions, yet there was significant conflict surrounding their redevelopment agenda. Neighborhood-based groups formed, often either to garner public resources for self-development or in resistance to the city or local universities' plans to develop land in a particular way (McKee, 2001; Sudow, 1999). Black power organizations often fought the planners' development goals (Willis, 1990). As my analysis shows below, this resistance is practically invisible in the stories about the era, recounted by those in power.

The stories I investigate are told after these elites had mostly lost the seats of power (circa. 1974–1980). The interviews were conducted after approaches to urban redevelopment employed in the 1950s and the leadership of city government had changed significantly. At the federal level, slum clearance had been effectively halted and the “urban renewal” program introduced in the 1949 Federal Housing Act had been reworked several times and finally ended in 1974, to be restructured as the Community Development Block Grant Program. The Philadelphia electorate had defeated the self-named reformers with the election of another Democrat, Jim Tate, in 1962. The city moved even further from the goals and means expounded by the reformers when it elected Tate's former police commissioner, Frank Rizzo, mayor in 1972 and again in 1976. Especially at the time of the interviews studied here, this group of elites had as much reason as we could imagine to be self-critical and to reflect negatively on their earlier urban redevelopment work. Instead, they give one another glowing reports.

3.2. *Data collection*

This project takes advantage of a set of interviews which are part of the “Walter M. Phillips Oral History Project” on deposit with Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives. Phillips collected the interviews with Philadelphia political elites between 1974 and 1980 with the unrealized intention of writing his own book. From the questions Phillips asks in the interviews, it appears that he was interested in documenting Philadelphia's “renaissance,” as well as the continued impact on the city of the individuals involved in the period. As I read the interviews to learn about postwar redevelopment, I was struck by the way the respondents talked; my subsequent study of their language tries to articulate what I found so striking.

In most of the archived interviews investigated here, it is clear that Phillips had a significant prior relationship with his subjects. Phillips himself was heavily involved as a civil servant and in Democratic politics during the period he researches. He graduated from Princeton in 1935 and Harvard Law School in 1938, and he returned to Philadelphia to practice law. He was the President of the Bureau of Municipal Research (1944–1947) and managed the successful 1951

election campaign of Joe Clark, Philadelphia's first postwar "reform" mayor. He then served in Clark's cabinet until 1955 and continued to work in political and civic capacities. He was a volunteer member of the City Policy Committee (1940), the Citizens' Committee on City Planning (1943), and the Greater Philadelphia Movement (1947).

The 145 interviews Phillips collected between 1974 and 1980 tend to focus on topics related to political reform or urban redevelopment.¹³ The interview subjects were primarily professional participants in the heyday of reform, from 1952 to 1965, as well as before and after. Their experiences are mostly those of top-level politicians and civil servants, but also of independent civic activists, consultants, and business owners. As mentioned above in Section 3.1, Phillips himself was heavily involved as a civil servant and in Democratic politics during the period he researched. I consider these data to be conversations among elites who knew they might also have a public audience (through Phillips' writing or the transcript archives).

The topic of interest – urban redevelopment – was defined as (1) commercial and residential construction, demolition, or decay; (2) industrial and business development, movement, or difficulty related to demographic and infrastructural changes; (3) the effects of public management of infrastructure on commercial and residential development or decay (i.e. 1 and 2); or (4) government policy specifically labeled to have the purpose of "urban renewal" or "urban redevelopment." Sampling by topic was appropriate to understand how identities form through stories of a particular subject matter. To find out whether the hypothesized patterns in storytelling exist at all, I wanted to keep constant as many contextual factors as possible. Sampling by person, time period, or other characteristics of the text may be more appropriate in future studies wanting to differentiate when and where these patterns exist.

For this project, I selected the universe of all interview segments with in-depth discussions of urban redevelopment and the problems it meant to address from 1952 to 1965. For example, former Assistant Director of the Philadelphia Housing Association, Cushing Dolbeare, tells a story about how a Housing Association study was first rejected by certain city officials, but later embraced because of others' interest in Philadelphia and Washington. The entire segment describing what happened was sampled. In another interview, former Philadelphia Development Coordinator William Rafsky claims that despite public renunciations the Eastwick urban renewal project in Southwest Philadelphia was a success because of investment made there and the resulting racial integration.

Speakers describe the era with topics ranging from the very general, such as federal public housing policy, to the more particular, such as actions of an individual on a particular day. To some extent, the stories vary greatly by individual because they focus on the work an individual did as well as his or her interests and outlooks, but in general, the stories are organized around common themes. Interviewees often discuss specific events at organizations that employed them and major public–private urban development projects. Less commonly, they focus on aspects of the city's challenges, such as deindustrialization and discrimination in the housing market, as well as particular individuals, such as Mayors Joe Clark and Richardson Dilworth or Development Coordinator Ed Bacon and real estate developer Albert Greenfield. Narrators also explain why they or others around them acted as they did at the time. For example, someone may

¹³ Some of the interviews appear to have been conducted in-person by Phillips; others seem to have been self-recorded by subjects responding to a list of questions provided by Phillips in writing. I do not analyze Phillips's speech because it is not completely recorded in the transcripts, and this dual form of interviewing makes it sometimes impossible to know what questions the respondents thought they were answering.

say she or he supported a clearance plan that she or he would now reject because of an increased awareness of the social costs. Or s/he might recall a willingness to accept a minimal level of corruption in a particular project because it seemed unavoidable.

Selecting discussions solely focused on urban development left me with text segments from 13 interviews. (See [Appendix A](#) for a list of the individuals whose interview segments were included in this study.) All segments of in-depth text (more than a single sentence in sequence) about redevelopment were compiled as the data for this study.

4. Methods

4.1. Identifying units of analysis

Readers form images of characters based largely on their actions ([Barthes, 1975](#)). [Linde \(1986\)](#) divides narratives into three components. The first, “event structures,” *show* actions, statements, and contexts. In literature, narrators primarily “show” what characters say and do ([Abrams, 1999](#)). To examine the “showing” sections (event structures) in these interviews, I sample text segments that recount more than a single *action*, which I call *plots*. I consider an action to be anything that conveys a changed state from before to after ([Franzosi, 2004](#)), including utterances (in the spirit of [Austin’s \(1962\)](#) definition of speech as action and Barthes’ broader definition of action as praxis, “desire, communication, or struggle” ([Barthes, 1975: 258](#))). For example, the simple expression, “City Council passed that ordinance” would be coded as an action as would, “I told Jim that plan would never work.”¹⁴

Linde’s other two components – “explanatory” and “evaluative” systems – *tell* about characters with more explicit authorial commentary.¹⁵ Explanatory systems provide theoretical frameworks to explore why things happen, and evaluative systems offer normative judgments. This study uses the proxies of “attributions” and “judgments” for these two narrative elements.¹⁶ Text segments are sampled as *attributions* if they explicitly ascribe responsibility for an action or result(s) of actions and as *judgments* if they offer overt normative evaluations. The text of the *plots* (their component actions), *attributions*, and *judgments* of the 13 interviews listed in [Appendix A](#) provide the data for this paper.

Particular units of analysis were carved from these *plots*, *judgments*, and *attributions* so that variables could be coded to them. ([Appendix B](#) gives a pictorial view of the multiple levels of units of analysis and the relevant variables.) I divided all *plots* into single *action* statements, and like [Franzosi \(2004\)](#), I identified the subject,¹⁷ with the simple difference that I am calling the

¹⁴ Though the coding of each sentence or part thereof which expresses an action would be more technically accurate, I chose to code the repetitive expression of a single event as one action. This was done so that the expression of an identical idea, simply repeated, was not counted twice.

¹⁵ [Franzosi \(2004\)](#) calls the parts of the text that do not recount action but tell the narrator’s attributions of responsibility or normative judgments “description” and does not analyze them because of his interest in “events.” In addition to actions, I identify judgments and attributions.

¹⁶ Literature scholars would find numerous other ways to distinguish between narrative elements or show the fluidity of any categorical boundaries between events, judgments, and attributions. Each of these categories certainly overlaps in sections of text. The distinctions used here are necessary and sufficient for the hypotheses of interest in this study but may not be sufficient in another.

¹⁷ For [Franzosi \(2004\)](#), the basic elements of an action are subject–verb–object. Verbs and objects are not of particular theoretical interest to this paper, so these parts of the analysis are not described in the main text here but are mentioned in later endnotes, and the full analysis can be made available upon request.

subject of the action the “agent” so as not to confuse it with a speaker, who might also be called a “subject” of an interview. The unique *agents* of each action statement form the units of analysis for much of this project.

Attributions are statements that *explain* the end result of a series of actions. In giving an attribution, a speaker identifies which of the many actions or contextual factors she or he believes were key in determining the outcome of the story, whether that outcome is a decision, inaction, physical project, or another result.¹⁸ For example, introducing a long segment on how the city managed redevelopment, former Executive Director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority Walter D’Alessio gives credit for the city’s unrivalled acquisition of grant funds to Philadelphia’s comprehensive plans and the individual actions of Philadelphia Development Coordinators Ed Bacon and Bill Rafsky and others:

But primarily because of a very highly developed comprehensive plan that had been prepared for Philadelphia when Ed Bacon was at the City Planning Commission, and through the involvement of *Ed Bacon, Bill Rafsky, and some others at that time* we were probably the most accomplished grantsmanship city that you could find in the United States. . . The reason it worked as well as it did is that we knew what we wanted to do. We had a very carefully developed plan. We had a sequence that we wished to follow. (*Emphasis was added to denote the coding of agents of attributions.*)

In another example, Cushing Dolbeare and other interviewees blame the federal government’s public housing spending limits for the construction of high rises that concentrated poor residents and magnified extant problems:

There was a *limit in public housing on the amount that could be spent per room*. And that had to include the total development cost. Well, if you were paying slum property owners. . .enormously high costs for acquiring housing of relatively little intrinsic value. Then you have to clear and prepare the site. And in public housing you have to fit all that in under a statutory per-room cost limitation. And the result is that the only kind of housing that you can build is very high density housing and high-rise buildings. . .I don’t think there was ever an advocate of building high-rise housing on the grounds that it was better housing than other types than low density projects or smaller housing projects would have been. (*Emphasis added to reflect coding of attributions.*)

I see attributions as a way a storyteller can narrate agency beyond the simple recounting of events. We might even argue that in stories about the past, attributions connote a higher level of agency than simple action statements because they offer a post hoc view of who or what had the power to make something happen. My primary interest in attributions is to know who or what is described as responsible, so I only identify the *agents* of attributions.

Judgments are defined as any phrase or set of phrases that explicitly attach positive or negative value to a topic. Any such *judgments* about redevelopment were coded as such. For instance, former Development Coordinator Ed Bacon praises himself and others for the area plan they produced:

¹⁸ Attributions attach responsibility or blame, i.e. agency, and are thus particularly important to identity processes. The crucial distinction made by attribution research is between internal and external attributions. At the individual level, an internal attribution is the assignment of responsibility to oneself. At the group level, internal attribution means assigning blame or responsibility to the group or its members. In either case, an external attribution is a statement that gives responsibility to anyone or anything outside what is considered internal, e.g. the individual or group.

I did and I'm still very proud of it and to my mind it's still the right one of rehabilitation of minimal clearance of provision of really necessary facilities like playgrounds for the schools, greenways, elimination of such things as junkyards and well, for example, concentrations of obsolete garages, but otherwise working with the fabric of the city itself.

On a negative note, John Bodine criticizes the development of the Schuylkill Expressway “this was planned to have many places bottlenecks. . . too few lanes to handle the traffic.” Speakers sometimes note not only their own judgments but also judgments made by others.

To summarize, the data used consists of the text of all *plots*, *attributions*, and *judgments* in the interviews that relate to urban redevelopment. Within the plots, which form the bulk of the data, individual *action statements* were identified. The grammar of these actions was dissected to document each unique *agent* within an action. Attributions of responsibility and judgments formed the remainder of the data. Within *attributions*, the *agent* given responsibility for whatever is being discussed was identified. The isolation of these elements allowed for coding variables' values to these units of analysis.

4.2. Applying variables to the units of analysis

4.2.1. Agents

Most of the attention in coding and analysis was spent differentiating characteristics of agents of actions and how they were described (see [Appendix C](#)). Agents of actions and attributions were given values to determine their group character and the specificity of language used to describe them. If the actor was described in the first-person “I” or “we,” it was coded as such. If the agent was “we,” it was coded as to whether the referent for “we” was explicit in the text.

Third-person agents were given values, when possible from the text, for three binary variables which served as proxies for in-group/out-group membership. The variables were *class* (elite/non-elite), *locale of constituency* (city of Philadelphia/broader or narrower than city), and *position* (ally or opponent). An out-group member on the class-dimension might be a housing activist from a low-income community; on the locale dimension the out-group member might be a representative of national government or a Philadelphia neighborhood organization; and on the position dimension, anyone described as opposed to the speaker's programs or policies would be an out-group member. For definitions, see [Appendix D](#).¹⁹ The mention of each third-person agent in action segments and attributions was also coded for the specificity of language used: the agent was coded as either someone named specifically, identified by role, or referred to generically.

4.2.2. Judgments

Judgments were coded with two variables. First, they were given a value as positive or negative. Second, it was noted whether the point of view is first-person (the speaker was the implied evaluator), or if the speaker is recounting someone else's opinion.

¹⁹ If information for the above variables was unavailable from the texts, the variable was not included in this part of the analysis. Only actors somehow identifiable to an outside reader as in-group or out-group members would have an effect on that reader's perception of group identity.

4.3. Performing the analysis

“Text-counting strategies,” employed widely in discourse studies, assume that a referent’s centrality to theme is reflected by its repetition in the text (Givón, 1983; Tomlin et al., 1997). Psycholinguists Pennebaker et al. (2003) call an approach that relies on noting the particular words people use, rather than only their content, a “word counting strategy.” Even the sophisticated computer method they have developed relies mostly on “simple word counts, such as standard grammatical units (personal pronouns, prepositions)” (Pennebaker et al., 2003: 550). In accordance with these methods and my theoretical interests, the majority of my analysis counts both the particular words used to refer to the agents of action and evaluations of those agents.

4.3.1. Narrating agency (*Hypothesis 1a*)

I expect tests of significance on the difference in means between third-person in-group and out-group agents of actions, for each of the three dimensions of group belonging (class, locale, position), to show that in-group members are portrayed disproportionately as agents in action statements. I perform a similar analysis, with similar predictions, about attributions. Because the sample size of attributions is much smaller than that of actions, a difference in means test could not be performed on each dimension of group membership. Instead, the difference between the mean number of attributions to members of the in-group on at least one dimension is compared to the mean number of attributions to members of the out-group on at least one dimension.^{20,21}

The invocation of the collective “we” as agent suggests some sort of in-group action.²² A speaker can make the use of “we” explicit, allowing the listener to identify the exact group being referred to. In the case of the use of an implicit or vague “we,” the reader or listener is left believing that there is some group of people out there, working in tandem, to accomplish whatever action the narrator speaks of. If a vague “we” is invoked, only the context of the rest of the narrative can indicate who might belong in that group. The group status of identifiable agents in other actions described would provide this context. A greater likelihood of the mention of in-

²⁰ I capitalize on Habermas and Cooke’s (1998) insight that speech, persuasion, communication, and even agreement are types of actions. Also, as mentioned earlier, I build on Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969) articulation of speech as action. Though it was not part of the primary analysis, I coded verbs as either those of 1 = speech or 0 = not speech. An example is when former Director of Philadelphia Human Relations Commission Dennis Clark tells Phillips, “I had a couple of ferocious confrontations with the late Mayor Dilworth about certain problems of discrimination in high-rise apartment buildings in Center Philadelphia, where Blacks had gained entrance.” Analysis reveals that speech acts form a significant portion of the action described by the policy-makers. Overall, one third of the actions in the sample are speech. There is no observable pattern, however, by group, of involvement in speaking, rather than other forms of doing; the three different indicators of group membership have three different relationships to the likelihood of being involved in a speech act rather than another form of action. Opponents are noted most commonly when they are the agents of speech acts intending to, sometimes successfully, change policy direction. This analysis is available upon request.

²¹ I extended my analysis of agency to the objects of actions, once I realized I was wrong to assume the objects of actions would be mostly plans, projects, or policies. I originally expected to find that objects mostly did not involve people because the narrators were enacting policy and implementing projects. I also expected that the human objects would mostly be out-group members, implying their passivity, and by comparison implying in-group members’ agency. I recognized that objects of action segments quite often involve other people. I found that rather than being passive, out-group members are mostly invisible. This analysis is available upon request.

²² Most narrative analysis understands the narrative as the story about “I” as the central subject with a cast of characters (Sewell, 1992). This project generally focuses on the whole cast of characters, including the interview subject, but I think it is important to establish whether the individual speaker as actor is actually central to the narrative and is one of those characters. Though not discussed in the findings section, Table 3 shows “I” is used for 13% of the agents of action.

group actors (discerned in the analysis of third-person agents previously mentioned) suggests that agency and group-ness are simultaneously narrated with the implicit “we.” I expect the use of an implicit we to be substantial, and to test that assumption I compare the extent of usage of “we,” which explicitly refers to an organization or group, to its use with no such clear referent.

4.3.2. *Positive judgments (Hypothesis 1b)*

Judgments are analyzed to see if they follow the identity-forming practice of portraying in-group members positively. Because the narratives focus almost exclusively on the actions of the speaker and her or his colleagues, judgments are generally about speakers’ own actions as individuals, about co-members of organizations, or more about the network of people and organizations they worked with. In line with social identity theory and supporting empirical research, I would predict a relatively large number of positive portrayals of the time and of the policy-makers’ actions.

I assumed that speakers would offer some disapproval, and some individuals would speak more negatively than others. But I expected that, in aggregate, these stories would positively portray what happened during the period they were in control. The speakers’ judgments were examined to see the relative prevalence of positive to negative ones. The prediction that positive judgments are more likely than negative ones is tested against a null hypothesis that the likelihood of either is equal.

To complete my analysis of the explicit normative judgments offered in the narratives, I also examine how the opinions of people other than the speaker are presented. The difference in the mean proportion of positive judgments of the speaker is compared to the proportion of positive judgments of others presented by the speaker. I have no prior expectation about the direction of these evaluations, but, once identified, I explore these portions of the text inductively.

In sum, findings that (a) in-group members are disproportionately described as agents of actions and attributions and (b) evaluations of in-group members are by-and-large positive would support predictions about their prevalence in storytelling (*Hypothesis 1*).

4.3.3. *Naming patterns (Hypothesis 2)*

The final analysis examines the specificity of language used to describe in-group and out-group agents of each action statement. For each dimension of in-group/out-group membership, differences in means test if specific, individual names are more likely to refer to in-group than out-group members, as predicted. A statistically significant difference between those specifically mentioned by name and those only identified by role or category is anticipated. This finding would confirm the hypothesis that specific language is employed for in-group agents, while abstract language is used for out-group agents.

5. Findings

5.1. *Narrating agency (Hypothesis 1a)*

Along each group dimension measured here (class, locale of constituency, and position), third-person agents identifiable by a distant reader are overwhelmingly more often similar to the narrator than different from him or her (*Table 1*). When identifiable along these dimensions, the third-person agents of these stories are in general three to four times as likely to be clearly similar

Table 1
In-group identification of third-person agents in action statements

Agent variables in-group/out-group identifying factors	Mean use of this type of agent ^a (N = sample size)
Agent status ^b	
Elite	.90 (256)
Non-elite	.10* (30)
Locale of agent's constituency	
City of Philadelphia	.83 (304)
Broader or narrower than the city	.17* (63)
Agent position	
Ally	.73 (144)
Opponent	.26* (52)

^a * indicates that the difference between this mean and the one immediately previous is significant at the $p < .0001$ level, calculated with z -statistic.

^b Agents in narratives were identifiable by none, one, two or three of these dimensions. Therefore, differences in means were calculated separately, for all those agents identified along a particular dimension.

Table 2
Attributions for actions or results of actions

Agent	Mean proportion of total agents in attributions (N=162) ^a		
We or I	0.14	} .75	In-Group Agents
In-group on at least one of three dimensions	0.61		
Out-group on at least one of three dimensions	0.25	.25*	Out-Group Agents

^a* indicates that the difference between this mean and the one immediately previous is significant at the $p < .0001$ level, calculated from z -statistic.

to the speaker. (Of the agents identifiable in the following categories, 90% are elite, 83% are responsible to the city of Philadelphia, and 73% are speakers' allies.)²³

Overall, just as action statements, post-facto attributions of responsibility for “what happened” are severely lopsided toward portraying in-group members as agents of the city's development and its environment. As we can see in Table 2, three times as many attributions, 75% ($N = 121$), are offered for third-person agents in the in-group as for third-person agents who are out-group on some dimension.

I also find substantial use of self-inclusive pronouns as agents of action (27% of agents of action), portraying the individual speaker and collectives she or he belongs to as significant actors (Table 3). The use of a vague “we,” without an explicit referent, as an agent of action is also

²³ In all cases, the difference is statistically significant above the .001 level.

Table 3
First-person (we and I) action segments

	Proportion of agents, compared to all ($N = 763$)	Mean use of this type of agent ^a
I	.13 (103)	.50
We	.13 (100)	.50
We		
Specific referent	.05	.41
Non-specific referent	.08	.59*
We or I	.27	.27
Neither we nor I	.73	.53*

^a * indicates that the difference between this mean and the one immediately previous is significant at the $p < .0001$ level, calculated with z -statistic.

prevalent. An outside reader of these transcripts would know what organization or collection of people is referred to by the “we” only 41% of the time it is used. In the remaining 59% of cases, the listener would have been able to infer some general sense of the referent, but it is not explicit in the text. When Ed Bacon, the man later known as the premier planner for Philadelphia, repeatedly uses “we” to describe the origins of the Philadelphia planning movement, he is probably referring to himself and a group of allies who organized a joint committee on city planning, but does not make his referents entirely clear. “We did in fact organize in a really political way on a ward district basis getting all the local organizations stirred up and directly approaching their district councilmen, to support the ordinance.” Former Assistant Director of Comprehensive Planning for Philadelphia Graham Finney also speaks of a vaguely-defined “we” when he sums up his opinion of the freeway construction, “But I would say that we have committed for another century the unfortunate severance of the city from its waterfront by I-95.” The disproportionate invocation of third-person agents who share characteristics with the narrator, discussed in the preceding paragraphs, suggests that the individuals referred to with this vague “we” are similar to that narrator. Any use of “we” as the subject of actions would assist in forming a sense of group-ness, whether or not the reference is made explicit. The persistent utterances of “we” without clear referents go further; they force the listener to infer from the rest of the narrative who might be included in that group of actors.

5.2. Positive judgments (*Hypothesis 1b*)

These interviews present a generally positive evaluation of in-group members’ actions and of the consequences of those actions (Table 4), which confirms the predictions of social identity theory. The judgments presented overall are overwhelmingly (65%, $N = 140$) positive. Sixty-six percent ($N = 150$) of the narrators’ own judgments are positive; only 47% ($N = 19$) of others’ judgments are positive. (Others’ judgments make up only 11% of the total sample.) Close analysis reveals that any negative evaluations are closely accompanied by a positive one, presumably dampening the negative effect. For instance, former Representative of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, Dennis Clark, uses Philadelphia’s national reputation to defend against a charge that reformers generally compromised too much and made only superficial changes on race: “there was no other city that I know of that had such an established nationwide reputation for attempting to deal with the problems such as Philadelphia had.” And former Executive Director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority Walter D’Alessio says of the development in Eastwick, “It is

Table 4
Normative judgments

Whose judgment is being represented?	Mean number of evaluations that are positive (N = sample size) ^a
Speaker	.66* (150)
Someone other than speaker	.47 (19)
Total	.66* (163)

^a * indicates that the difference between this mean and $H_0 = .5$ is significant at the $p < .0001$ level, calculated from z -statistic.

viewed by people outside the city as being very successful. Philadelphia tends to think of it in negative terms.”

Overall, as expected, this triumphant account of urban redevelopment directed by these political elites – created through repeated descriptions of actions, attributions, and evaluations – is likely to leave a previously uninformed reader with an impression of them as *a group of* the most accomplished, innovative, and even sensitive policy-makers in the country.

5.3. Naming patterns (Hypothesis 2)

Specific language describes more third-person in-group than out-group actors. The results of this analysis are dramatic (see Table 5). All dimensions of in-group/out-group identification exhibit large differences in the likelihood that an actor will be described by name. Eighty-two percent of elite actors are described by name ($N = 250$), in comparison with 13% of non-elite actors. Eighty percent of actors with the city of Philadelphia as a constituency are given a name ($N = 298$), compared to 58% of actors with more broad or narrow constituencies ($N = 61$). Finally, 82% of allies are named ($N = 142$), compared with just 50% of opponent actors ($N = 49$). Disproportionate reference to in-group actors by name is consistent with the prediction that third-person in-group references are more likely to be individually specific.

Table 5
Use of general and specific language to describe agents in action segments, by type of agent

Agent type	Mean proportion of agents of this type named specifically, vs. as role or with generic language (N = sample size) ^a
Agent status ^b	
Elite	.82 (250)
Non-elite	.13* (30)
Locale of agent's constituency	
City of Philadelphia	.80 (298)
Broader or narrower than the city	.58* (61)
Agent position	
Ally	.82 (142)
Opponent	.5* (49)

^a * indicates that the difference between this mean and the one immediately previous is significant at the $p < .0001$ level, calculated with z -statistic.

^b Agents in narratives were identifiable by none, one, two, or three of these dimensions. Therefore, differences in means were calculated separately for all those agents identified along a particular dimension.

6. Discussion

This study articulates some of the most elementary parts of text that are likely to create collective identities. The repetition of actions and attributions establishes co-group members as subjects. Strongly positive evaluations of in-group members' actions add power to these agentic images. In this set of interviews with political elites about their community's past, the speakers portray in-group members as praiseworthy agents. Text segments that both "show" and "tell" about urban development portray in-group members as the premier agents of the city's past and, by extension, of the city's future.

In these same text segments, specific names disproportionately describe third-person in-group agents, and abstract names disproportionately identify out-group agents. Though neither the causes nor effects of this naming pattern could be examined here, both were posited from secondary research. Any characters' social proximity²⁴ to a speaker may make that speaker more likely to name her or him. Repetitive representations of individual characters with similar group memberships, without explicit naming of the group, may allow a speaker to portray such characters as positive agents (thus having a collective identity) without overt reference to any group. That is, the speakers' naming practices are likely to allow them to tell stories about specific individuals which simultaneously, but subtly, create images of larger groups.

7. Conclusion

The innovative methodology presented here allows systematic investigation of important mechanisms from story text. The author developed the possibilities posed here from prior research on whiteness and class, but these mechanisms are likely to apply to any U.S. power/identity dimension. This project carefully distinguishes particular storytelling practices that may simultaneously contribute to identity formation and conceal their identity-forming impact.

Strategic study of audiences could verify the consequences of these storytelling patterns on social identity. Researchers could unpack if and when these storytelling practices create collective identities through characters. Who acts? How are actors judged? Narrators answer these questions repeatedly as they describe character actions. If social identity is a sense that a set of group members *do* something *positive*, speech that creates such images may form a crucial identity practice.

Future researchers could study when and if language used for character references draws attention away from or to that identity-formation practice. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]), and a growing subfield of scholars of whiteness in the U.S. suggest language that masks group-forming practices may cause people to reproduce social inequalities unwittingly. In storytelling, individually specific and collectively ambiguous referents may shield the social-identity-forming effect of character descriptions from view.

Comparisons of different groups and the same groups in different contexts, using the methodology developed here, would help decipher causes of these everyday storytelling practices. Speakers may anticipate a certain effect of their speech, and choose their words accordingly, but they may not. It is possible that differential specificity for in-group and out-group members is just as common in narrations by the powerful as by the powerless. If so, then social proximity is likely to be its only cause. It is also possible that the powerful tend to use

²⁴ However, fame, which might imply extreme social distance but still cause familiarity, could have the same impact.

relatively specific language for naming co-member agents of action, and the less powerful use more abstract language when they describe co-member agents of action. If so, additional mechanisms are at work.

The powerful, with interest in social reproduction, might generally avoid group labels and refer to co-member actors by name, thus strategically hiding how narratives instill group members' sense of a right to power. The powerless resisting persistent inequalities, as well as subversive members of powerful groups, may send their own signals with their naming patterns. They may use explicit group labels liberally and refer to actors by category to draw attention to social, rather than individual, forces. Acts of resistance to such group tendencies will be particularly important to study.

Acknowledgments

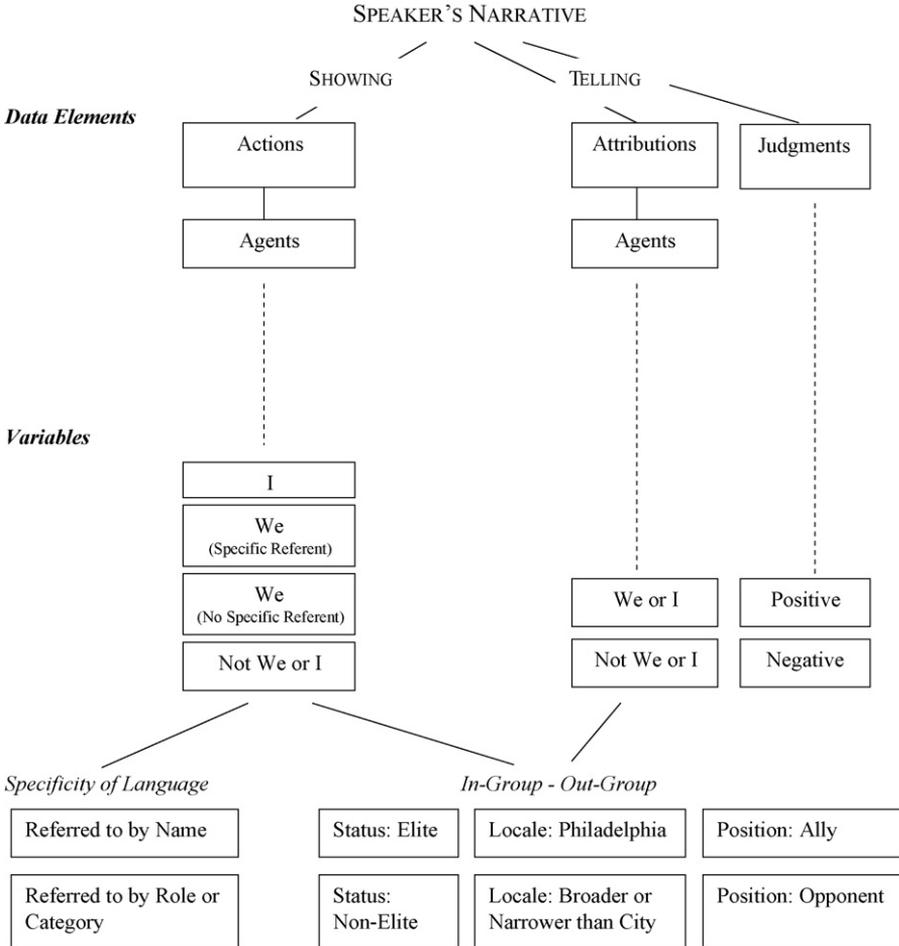
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Appendix A. Walter Phillips oral history collection interviewees who tell in-depth stories about urban redevelopment between 1974 and 1980^a

Name	Primary employment in Philadelphia before 1965
Cushing Dolbeare	Philadelphia Housing Association: Metropolitan Consultant and Assistant Director
Dennis Clark	Commission on Human Relations, city of Philadelphia: Field Representative and Chair of the Housing Division
Edmund Bacon	Philadelphia Housing Association: Director; Planning Commission, city of Philadelphia: Executive Director; city of Philadelphia: Development Coordinator
G. Holmes Perkins	Housing Commission, city of Philadelphia: President; Planning Commission, city of Philadelphia: Member; School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania: Dean
Graham Finney	Community Renewal Program, city of Philadelphia: Director; Comprehensive Planning, city of Philadelphia: Assistant Director
Gustave G. Amsterdam	Albert Greenfield & Co.: Vice President
Henry Sawyer	City of Philadelphia: Councilman
John Bodine	City Policy Committee, city of Philadelphia: President; Penjerdel: Director
Richard McConnell	Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC): Director; Food Distribution Center (FDC): Director
Robert Folwell	Powellton Village neighborhood: Resident Activist; Democratic Party: Democratic Committeeman; Quakers: Volunteer Lobbyist; American Civil Liberties Union
Vincent Kling	Planning Commission, city of Philadelphia: Private Architect contracted to work on Penn Center, Washington Square, and Society Hill projects
Walter D'Alessio	Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority: Executive Director; Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC): Executive Vice President
William Rafsky	City of Philadelphia: Housing Coordinator; city of Philadelphia: Development Coordinator

^aInformation on employment gathered from interviews and secondary sources. The exact title of organizations or dates of employment may be inaccurate. When the position the individual had is known, it is listed after a colon. Otherwise the organization only is listed.

Appendix B. Overview of principle data elements and variables^a



^aIn the Data Elements section, solid lines indicate that the bottom element is a subgroup. In the Variables section, a solid line indicates that the bottom variable is given a value for the above subgroup of data elements.

Appendix C. Summary list of variables, by unit of analysis

Unit of analysis	Variable (1 = yes)
Agents (of actions or attributions)	Is agent “I”?
Agents (of actions or attributions)	Is agent “we”?
Agents (of actions or attributions)	In-group membership: class; is the agent clearly a member of the functional elite?
Agents (of Actions or Attributions)	In-group membership: locale of constituency Did the agent represent the city of Philadelphia as a whole in his or her work?
Agents (of actions or attributions)	In-group membership: position; is the agent represented as supporting the speaker’s position on the issue described?
Agents of actions	If agent is “we,” does it have a specific referent?
Agents of actions	If the agent is not “we” or “I,” is the agent referred to by name?
Judgments	Is the judgment positive?; is the perspective first-person?

Appendix D. Selected units of analysis and variable definitions

Units of analysis

Plot: A text segment that expresses a series of events. It begins and ends with a change in theme.

Action: A text segment expressing a changed state between before and after, including but not limited to a speech act.

A set of sentences using different words to express the same action (i.e. subject–verb–object) was coded as a single action.

Attribution: Text segments which explain the end result of a series of actions by discerning which among the many actions and contextual factors leading up to the result was the key cause(s).

Agent: The text that describes the subject of any action statement or the recipient of an attribution.

Judgment: Any text segment that explicitly expresses a normative judgment. It begins and ends with either a change in topic or the offering of a different evaluation for the same topic.

Variables

In-group/out-group variables for agents not identified as “we” or “I”

Status (elite/non-elite): Agents were identified by whether they occupied positions which made them functional elites. “Functional elites” are those who occupy positions of power in institutions, in contrast to social elites marked by their class background. Agents coded as elite are at the highest echelons of their agency and/or their organizations or at the highest levels of power in their particular industry, whether in government, advocacy groups, or business. Agents were coded as non-elite if they were identifiably not elite. Otherwise, this variable was left uncoded.

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