

Talking Your Self into It: How and When Accounts Shape Motivation for Action

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Abstract

Following Mills, several prominent sociologists have encouraged researchers to analyze actors' motive talk not as data on the subjective desires that move them to pursue particular ends but as post hoc accounts oriented toward justifying actions already undertaken. Combining insights from hermeneutic theories of the self and pragmatist theories of action, we develop a theoretical position that challenges dichotomous assumptions about whether motive accounts reflect *either* justifications *or* motivations for action, instead illustrating how they can migrate from one status to the other over time. We develop this perspective through a comparative analysis of actors' involvements in two quite different careers of social action—religion and mixed martial arts—documenting both how and when justificatory talk about actors' motives for initiating a course of action at one point in time became formative of their subjective motivations for sustaining these same courses of action at another.

Keywords

culture, motivation, identity, accounts, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

What are people doing when they talk about their motives? In everyday life, the common-sense answer is people are verbally expressing the psychological desires, thoughts, and intentions that move them to pursue particular courses of action. Yet within sociology, a line of influential scholars extending from Mills (1940) in the mid-twentieth century to Vaisey (2009) in the early twenty-first have encouraged sociologists to analyze actors' motive talk not as data reflecting the underlying subjective states that drive action forward but as socio-rhetorical devices that seek to align actors' past conduct with the normative or interpretive demands of the present situation (e.g., Goffman 1971; Mills 1940; Scott & Lyman 1968; Vaisey 2009). Many sociologists, in other words, have understood actors' motive talk not in

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terms of the inner desires that move them to pursue particular ends but as post hoc accounts oriented toward justifying actions already undertaken.

While affirming several insights within this perspective, in this article, we challenge a priori assumptions about whether motive talk best reflects actors' justifications *or* motivations for action, instead illustrating how accounts can migrate from justificatory to motivational status over time. While previous research has noted that actors' post hoc accounts may be poor reflections of the subjective desires that initiated a course of action in the first instance, we demonstrate that such accounts can nevertheless play pivotal roles in explaining what sustains motivation for that same line of action over time. Combining hermeneutic perspectives on self-identity with pragmatist insights on the temporality of action, we show that accounts can function as *hermeneutic hooks* that interpretively link actors' present actions with elements of their more temporally extended self-narratives, conjoining their practices in the here and now with a motivational project of identity exploration and development that extends far beyond the boundaries of the present moment.

We go on to apply this perspective to ethnographic case studies of actors' involvements in two different careers of social action—religion and mixed martial arts (MMA), respectively—to empirically illustrate both how and when accounts worked to subjectively motivate people to continue pursuing their courses of action, especially in the face of initial feelings of ambivalence, ambiguity, or lack of desire. Through accounts, actions associated with religion and fighting became reinterpreted as significant plot points in actors' ongoing life stories—namely, their understandings of who they were in the past, are in the present, and might become in the future. In interaction with others in their respective communities, religious and MMA practitioners talked their selves into the action, interpretively linking their religious and fighting practices to a deeply meaningful and motivational identity project.

We begin with a discussion of the sociological trend of analyzing subjects' motive accounts as indices of the cultural constraints on action within a social situation, a line of thought and analysis that can be traced as far back as Mills (1940) but has also been incorporated into several other contemporary theoretical traditions. While noting the important insights of these perspectives, we also critique some problematic assumptions about the relationship (or lack thereof) between actors' "external" motive accounts and their "internal" subjective motivations, ones that tend to foreclose alternative—and perhaps ultimately complementary—conceptualizations of the relationship between motive talk and subjective motivation. We go on to develop our conceptualization of how and when accounts come to influence motivation for action, foregrounding dynamics of self-interpretation and temporality overlooked in previous approaches. We then illustrate the explanatory value of this perspective through our ethnographic case studies, showing how—both in the pews and on the mats—accounts worked to motivate actors to continue pursuing their lines of action. We conclude with a discussion of our findings' broader significance for ongoing conversations regarding the relationships among culture, action, and subjectivity.

TRACING SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF MOTIVE TALK: FROM SUBJECTIVE "SPRINGS" TO SITUATIONAL "STRINGS"

When I look back, throughout my life, I was always searching for something real, you know, something with a solid foundation, with roots. And then I found [Eastern] Orthodoxy, the original Christian Church, and it was like, "Yeah, this is for me. This is the real deal. This is what I've been searching for all along." (Corey, Eastern Orthodox catechumen)

We are the products of thousands of years of evolution. It took a long time to get bodies that can do this! [laughingly gesturing to the people grappling on the mat beside us, twisting and writhing against each other as they struggle to gain an advantage]. I can't head back to that chair and desk. It would be insulting to my monkey ancestors. (Mark, ex-accountant, cage fighter)

What motivates people to commit themselves to a new and seemingly strange religious path or to persistently and enthusiastically engage in a violent sport that might get them seriously injured? In our respective fieldwork with Eastern Orthodox Christian converts and mixed martial artists in the contemporary United States, practitioners' own discussions of these questions converged on a surprisingly similar theme. According to our research subjects, engaging in the action of religion or fighting was primarily motivated by a search for selfhood, a quest to discover who one is, was, and might become. In seeking out their local Orthodox churches and MMA gyms, our participants said they were also seeking out—and discovering—their very selves.

What are we to make of such accounts in explaining why people pursue particular lines of action? Several contemporary strands of sociological thought have urged caution in approaching actors' accounts as offering insight into the subjective intentions that propel action forward. Instead, these traditions have argued actors' verbal accounts are actually oriented toward—and so a better reflection of—the normative expectations for action existing within the external social milieu. Talk of motives, in other words, does not actually index motivation in the sense of a subjective desire or “drive” that moves action forward but instead points to how people must make sense of and justify actions already undertaken.

An important starting point for this particular perspective on subjects' motive talk is the now classic paper by C. Wright Mills (1940), “Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive.” Mills famously argued against a representational approach to language that would take motive talk as “referring to private states in individuals” (Mills 1940:904). Instead, Mills (1940:904) suggested, one should examine the socially constitutive functions of language: how motive language “coordin[ates] diverse actions” and thus helps consolidate social order. In other words, instead of treating motive talk as accurately reflecting the “subjective ‘springs’ of action” inhering within individuals, they should be conceptualized as social rhetorics people use to interpret, explain, and justify their actions to others. “Motives,” as Mills (1940:905) succinctly put it, “are words . . . they do not denote any elements ‘in’ individuals.” Instead, they function as “accepted *justifications* for present, future, or past programs or acts” (Mills 1940:907). As such, the researcher should not look to accounts for evidence of the psychological “springs” that propel individuals to action but instead look to accounts of motive as providing the rhetorical “strings” that tie peoples' actions to the normative expectations of a socially delimited time and place (Mills 1949:910) and/or the “strategies of action” that actors use to make their conduct sensible to others (Mills 1940:907).

Mills's (1940) original insights about the socially constitutive functions of language and his decoupling of motive talk from subjectivity were eventually developed by later sociological traditions. One well-established line of research originates from the sociology of accounts tradition pioneered by interactionists Scott and Lyman (1968). Within this line of work, researchers examine how actors use the language of motives to account for behavior that is deemed problematic by others. This has proved quite productive, as demonstrated by the numerous empirical studies and attempts at theoretical refinement published since (Blum and McHugh 1971; Blumstein 1974; Hopper 1993; Monaghan 2006; Nichols 1990; Orbuch 1997; Pryor 1996; Scully and Marolla 1984; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Goffman (1971) also incorporated Scott and Lyman's perspective into dramaturgical sociology, particularly in the

analysis of “remedial interchanges,” namely, how actors use accounts of their motives to reposition the meaning of actions as socially acceptable, protecting themselves against a potentially “spoiled identity.” Like Mills before them, sociologists of accounts do not treat motive talk as reflecting the subjective intentions animating the action but as after-the-fact justifications that actors use to attempt to bridge the gap between untoward actions and situational expectations.

Following Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodologists have examined the everyday techniques by which actors “observably organize their accounts of action” (Mulkey and Gilbert 1982:182)—in other words, how social actors make their actions intelligible to one another as instances of an ordered reality. Verbally accounting for actions by excusing or “remedying” them and imputing typical motives to oneself and others is one of the primary methods by which social actors constitute their everyday social realities (e.g., Barnes 2000; Schlegoff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). Again, the analytic focus shifts away from analyzing actors’ talk for insight into the subjective reasons why an action is undertaken toward analyzing accounts as reflecting how the normative order of a particular social situation is maintained. Like Mills, ethnomethodologists encourage sociologists to understand actors’ accounts of why they did something as radically oriented toward the intersubjective demands for action that exist in the present situation. As Barnes (2000:2) puts it, “for all that it appears to refer to the internal states of individuals, voluntaristic discourse is actually the vehicle of human sociability, through which its users co-ordinate their actions and cognitions.”

The influence of this perspective on actors’ talk is also found within strands of contemporary cultural sociology that focus less attention on culture’s role in determining the ends of human action and more on its role in organizing the means (Frye 2012; Kaufman 2004; Vaisey 2009, 2010), or what Vaisey (2009) has termed cultural sociology’s *motivation-justification split*. Swidler-inspired repertoire or “toolkit” theories, for example, approach actors’ accounts not as reflections of their subjective desires but as cultural tools through which they develop and organize strategies of action. Swidler (2001) argues in her influential *Talk of Love* that what Americans in her study verbally expressed about love should not be analyzed as accurate reflections of motivations for why they involve themselves in romantic relationships. Instead, their accounts offer insight into the available cultural repertoires through which they can justify, make sense of, and meaningfully act out—or opt out of—their relational commitments. Actors’ accounts of romantic love, Swidler (2001:127–28) argues, “correspond neither to personal experience nor to the observations people make of others they know. . . . Rather the love myth accurately describes the structural constraints of the institution of marriage.” Like the scholars previously described, Swidler analyzes subjects’ motive accounts for why they get or stay married as data on the demands of external, institutional factors, not actors’ internal desires and intentions.

More recently, Vaisey (2009) has developed an influential dual-process model of culture in action that attempts to put the question of motivation back at the center of cultural analysis. Vaisey brings together Bourdieu’s notion of habitus with cognitive psychologists’ distinctions between system one and system two cognition (e.g., Evans 2003; Haidt 2001; Kahneman 2011) to argue that motivations operate primarily at the level of deeply ingrained dispositions and automatic cognitive associations existing below the threshold of discourse and reflective consciousness. More specifically, Vaisey argues that subconscious cultural schemas of attraction and repulsion within habitus, or system one cognition, are what motivate people to behave in consistent ways across time and space, whereas consciously articulated motives operating at the level of discursive, or system two, cognition are generally after-the-fact justifications that are only loosely coupled to what subjectively drives actors to do what they do. While critical of theories of action that ignore the question of motivation

altogether, Vaisey also treats actors' own accounts of their motives as post hoc, socially acceptable rationalizations for action.

In sum, over the course of several decades and across multiple theoretical traditions (interactionism, ethnomethodology, dramaturgy, toolkit theory, dual-process theory, etc.), many sociologists have eschewed treating actors' motives accounts as relevant data on what subjectively motivates action, opting instead for a perspective that analyzes them as rhetorical devices—vocabularies of motive, justifications, excuses, techniques of neutralization, remedial actions, strategies of action, and so on—aimed at aligning actions with the cultural, normative, and/or interactional requirements of the situation.

There are certainly good reasons for being skeptical of accounts as straightforward data on underlying motivations. Sociologists of accounts have rightly pointed out that when actors are asked about motivations influencing why they did something, they may come up with socially acceptable reasons that make sense in the moment of questioning but have little relationship to what actually motivated the action in the first instance, an insight backed by research on the sometimes unstable relationship between observed behavior at one point in time and self-reported attitudes at another (e.g., Beckford 1978; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Martin 2010, 2011; Vaisey 2009). It is also the case that actors' accounts are not purely individual but are influenced by the broader scripts and discourses existing within the wider culture. Actors' behaviors are enabled and constrained by collective understandings of what counts as justifiable action (cf. Boltanski and Thevenot 2006), and talk about motives plays an important role in deciphering, legitimating, and negotiating what counts as such. And as the ethnomethodologists point out, actors' accounts are not simply a representational medium to communicate internal states but can also be performative—namely, partially constitutive of action and the social contexts in which action occurs. Finally, as Vaisey (2009) notes, peoples' motivations for acting may operate through habitual dispositions and automatic cognitive associations that are difficult if not impossible for them to consciously recognize and articulate.

Despite our appreciation of these insights, we depart from the aforementioned literature in two significant ways. First, we diverge from strong assumptions that motive accounts only provide sociologists data on the immediate social context and “do not denote any elements ‘in’ individuals” (Mills 1940:905). Or, in the more evocative language of Garfinkel (1963:190), “there is no reason to look under the skull, for nothing of interest is to be found there but brains.” We argue that such strong a priori assumptions lead sociologists to overlook how accounts can also be directed toward aligning actions with internal understandings of the self and how in turn these interpretive hooks can sharpen, redefine, and even construct new motivations over time. In the following, we argue that one does not have to take a strictly representational view of the relationship between motive accounts and motivations (i.e., Do they accurately reflect the previous motivations or not?) but can attend to the ways such accounts reconstitute motivations through ongoing processes of self-interpretation.

Second, even when accounts are inaccurate representations of actors' initial motivations for embarking on a course of action, our cases show this is not necessarily reason to dismiss their value for explaining motivation in toto. Our research highlights the significance of accounts for sustaining motivation for action over time, particularly over the course of what sociologists have termed *social careers* or trajectories of *becoming*—namely, long-term, consistent lines of action in which actors develop a particular identity (e.g., Becker 1953; Becker and Strauss 1956; Benzecry 2009; Goffman 1959; Hughes 1958; Richardson 1978; Tavory 2016). We analyze a process in which initially ambivalent religious and martial arts practitioners would be offered motive accounts that made sense of their experiences by more established members of the sites, ones aimed at persuading them their new actions were very

much “for and about them.” Although initially post hoc justifications, over time, these accounts became reworked and internalized by actors as part of their own self-interpretations. In each case, we document how and when accounts subjectively propelled action forward by closely linking actors’ practices to a meaningful and motivational project of self-development and self-discovery.

In the next section, we develop a theoretical perspective that more fully elaborates on this process, helping us make sense of our empirical cases as well as the motivational significance of accounts more generally.

FROM SITUATIONAL STRINGS TO HERMENEUTIC HOOKS: HOW AND WHEN ACCOUNTS MATTER FOR MOTIVATION

In what follows, we draw from hermeneutic theories of self-identity and pragmatist insights on action and experience to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how accounts shape motivation and when in a course of action they are most motivationally significant.

We redirect sociological focus from how motive talk aligns out-of-place actions with the normative demands of the situation to how it attempts to align them with actors’ own interpretations of self. On this point, we draw inspiration from hermeneutic scholars of identity (Giddens 1991; Mead 1934; Ricoeur 1988, 1992; Taylor 1985, 1989), theorists who assert that self-identity is constituted in ongoing acts of self-interpretation. Human beings, as Taylor (1985:45) phrases it, are “self-interpreting animals”—to possess an identity is to have an ongoing, reflexive interpretation of oneself, one that typically takes the form of a narrative. In the face of present action, such theorists argue, a primary way humans make sense of what they are doing is by interpretively placing—or “emplotting”—the action in relation to aspects of their personal pasts, presents, and perceived futures. This transforms the meaning of the action from an isolated event to a causally connected episode within a more temporally extended and personally relevant chain of meaning (Somers 1994; Wagner-Pacifici 2000). At the same time, emplotting new events into one’s autobiography can also alter identity as the integration of new kinds of actions and experiences into one’s story can reshape the meaning and significance of past events as well as future trajectories (Atkins 2010; Ricoeur 1988, 1992; Somers 1994). The content of actors’ self-understandings are thus in part *constituted* by “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going . . . [to] continually integrate events that occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self” (Giddens 199: 54).

We draw from but also extend this literature by arguing that motive accounts are key mechanisms through which such narrative integration occurs. More specifically, while research on accounts has largely looked at how they function as situational strings, we focus theoretical attention on how accounts may also serve as hermeneutic hooks that propose where a meaningful connection between a course of action and an actor’s life story can be found. Utilized as hooks, motive accounts introduce interpretive linkages between present actions and more temporally extended autobiographies, suggesting to actors that their current practices are in some way central to their ongoing understandings of who they were in the past, are in the present, and might become in the future. As we illustrate in the empirical sections in the following, while these accounts are often initially “cast” by others in interaction, actors may internalize and continue to develop these accounts as key aspects of their self-narratives.

We also follow hermeneutic scholars in their arguments that self-interpretations are deeply intertwined with subjective motivation as the desire for self-understanding can itself be a strong and influential driver of action (Giddens 1991; Ricoeur 1992; Taylor 1989;

Trzebinski 1998). This is a claim supported by a robust literature in cognitive and social psychology, where scholars find peoples' involvements in and commitments to particular courses of action are deeply motivated by their own self-concepts (see Gecas 1986, 1991; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Miles 2014; Miyamoto 1970; Oyserman 2007; Oyserman and Destin 2010; Quinn 1992). A central insight here is that when a line of action is understood as congruent with actors' senses of self—as for and about them in some meaningful way—they become more invested in, animated by, and committed to it. Accounts, we argue, can be important mechanisms through which such congruence between identities and actions are interactively forged. In articulating a significant connection between actors' practices and their self-narratives, we illustrate how accounts shaped motivation by suggesting that continuing to engage in the actions constituting religion or MMA was fulfilling or elaborating parts of their life stories in important ways. In other words, accounts motivated actions by imbuing them with “narrative possibilities” (Katz 1988:290), intimating that continuing to engage in the action was a logical, significant, even causally necessary next step or plot point in an actor's life story (see also Mattingly 1994; Trzebinski 1998).

This conceptualization of accounts also draws from pragmatist insights on motivation, action, and experience. Pragmatists understand motivation as a relational phenomenon, one arising from the interaction and resonance between (1) aspects of the social situation and (2) the sediments of past, present, and anticipated future experience individuals bring with them into that situation (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mead 1934; Norton 2019; Schutz 1967; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). In important ways, this perspective shares with the aforementioned dual-process model the assumption that what motivates people to do something cannot be solely explained in terms of the present context as actors bring with them a personal history of experience based on previous socialization. However, while dual-process theorists highlight the importance of the automatic cognitive associations and subconscious dispositions—or habitus—actors bring into the social environment, pragmatists also emphasize the significance of actors' consciously held and discursively articulable self-concepts (Dewey 1922; Gross 2008; Leschziner 2015; Mead 1934). We demonstrate how establishing a motivation-inducing hook between actors' actions and self-interpretations is an active, collective accomplishment, one in which motive accounts play a pivotal role.

Also drawing from pragmatist insights, we pay close attention to how this self-interpretive process unfolds over time, allowing us to document not only how accounts work to sustain motivation but also pinpointing those instances when they appear to be most causally significant. We argue accounts are most motivationally significant during moments when actors experience ambivalence, ambiguity, and/or trepidation with regard to their present practices—namely, times when actors' current actions conflict with, disrupt, or otherwise problematize their existing habits and dispositions. Following Bourdieu (1990:62), sociologists have pointed to how such moments of misalignment between existing dispositions and practices are motivationally problematic as they disrupt the “ontological complicity” that holds between habitus and social context—a condition Bourdieu terms *hysteresis*. Yet for pragmatists, the problematization of habitual action also provides actors with opportunities for reflective thought and the creative (re)construction of meanings, identities, and possibilities for action (Dewey 1922; Joas 1996). We demonstrate accounts can play a crucial role in this process of reinterpreting initially problematic experience, rekindling actors' motivation by orienting attention away from the frustrations of the present moment and toward the more spatially and temporally expansive self-narrative in which the present action plays a supporting role (cf. Mische 2008). Accounts, to draw from the terminology of Dewey (1922), help construct new “ends-in-view,” encouraging actors to “reread” frustrating, painful, or dull

actions in the present as necessary—even vitally important—components of a more meaningful, expansive project of identity development and self-discovery.

RESEARCH SETTINGS AND METHODS

The analysis in this article is based on two separate ethnographic studies—an examination of religious conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity conducted by the first author and an exploration of the allure of training in mixed martial arts conducted by the second author.

Both studies were conducted in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, and the surrounding metropolitan region. The area was particularly suited to a study of religious conversion as it represented a diverse microcosm of Eastern Orthodoxy—and conversions to Orthodoxy—in the United States. At the time of research, the area was home to 16 Orthodox churches representing 8 of the 11 self-governing ethnic jurisdictions in the nation. For the majority of their time in the United States, Eastern Orthodox parishes were ethnically homogeneous enclaves characterized by the ethnonational identifications of Eastern European and Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants (Stokoe and Kishkovsky 1995). Over the past two decades, however, many Eastern Orthodox churches have become home to converts from different religious, spiritual, and even “unchurched” backgrounds.

The bulk of the data presented here comes from three parishes in which the first author conducted intensive fieldwork for 14 months in 2010–2011. The author selected these particular parishes because they were three of the most well known in the local Orthodox community for receiving and socializing converts and because each represented variation with regard to ethnic culture, ratio of converts to cradle Orthodox (those born and raised in the church), geographic location, and size.

Minneapolis-St. Paul is also one of the epicenters of MMA in the United States—more than 20 schools operate within a 45-minute drive of the city center, many with members competing in cage fights. Most are located in suburban strip malls or warehouses on the outer edge of urban sprawl. The rapid rise of such training sites followed the popularization of the full-combat sport first being introduced to the United States in 1993 by the inaugural Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC; Gentry 2002). Following this event, MMA went through accelerated periods of growth, controversy, regulation and rule change, and acceptance—with the UFC recently being sold for \$4 billion (Merced 2016).

From 2007 to 2013, the second author trained at gyms ranging from the nationally known, to mid-sized businesses opened by entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize on the increasing popularity, to local schools opened by traditional martial artists, MMA fans, and rag-tag collectives learning to fight in converted garages and barns. The majority of the analysis in this article is based on immersion within two locations chosen for their contrasting approaches and range of clientele—one more structured and linked with traditional martial arts and the other offering a clearer rejection of traditional approaches and mythologies. In both sites, the vast majority of participants were enthusiastic amateurs, not paid professionals.

Both researchers began their respective projects independently but with a similar interest in why people were involved in and how they became socialized into these new practices and communities. Both also employed a form of “observant participation” (Wacquant 2011)—immersing themselves in their sites and participating in the practices of the field to analyze the processes and attendant experiences by which people became Orthodox Christians and MMA fighters. For example, the first author engaged in rituals such as liturgies, prayers, and lengthy periods of fasting, and the second author exchanged punches, kicks, and chokes with other members of the gym. While neither fully became members of the sites—the first author did not convert, and the second author continued to have research

as a motivation for his time spent on the mats—both were able to draw on their participation to gain access to conversations and experiential aspects of these activities that would have otherwise been impossible to appreciate.

During the process of immersion, both authors became independently interested in the question of what motivated people in their sites to commit to these at once voluntary but also physically and psychologically demanding lines of action, crossing the threshold from curious newcomer to devoted enthusiast. The authors found little in these actors' backgrounds or networks *alone* that consistently explained what motivated them to keep coming back to the action, week after (often grueling) week. For example, while those interested in Eastern Orthodoxy were mainly (though not exclusively) people with prior religious backgrounds, there were also substantial differences in belief, ritual, and experience between Eastern Orthodoxy and their former religious identifications, and potential converts did not share the salient ethnic backgrounds of the cradle members of their new religious communities. Similarly, while some of those who engaged in MMA had previous experience with organized athletics, the majority were of the highly educated, upper-middle, professional, and creative class—a set of class dispositions that generally discourages participation in violent combat sports (e.g., Bourdieu 1978). In addition, most people in these individuals' existing social networks did not share an enthusiasm for these practices. Subjects talked about how engaging in Eastern Orthodox and MMA careers made them appear “strange,” “weird,” or “crazy” to significant others, including spouses, parents, coworkers, and friends. In short, there appeared just as many background factors discouraging continued participation in these communities as encouraging it.

In continuing to investigate this question in their fieldwork, both authors became aware of a process in which those who stuck with the practice would be regularly “talked into” the action. In both sites, actors would be offered various accounts that made sense of why they were involved in these new, seemingly strange practices and experiences, motive talk aimed at persuading them that these actions were very much for and about them. After discussing these similarities, the authors decided to combine these observations in an effort to investigate and theorize the processes by which accounts appeared to sustain motivation for action across such seemingly disparate cases.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the following sections, we utilize data from our respective field sites to demonstrate how and when accounts subjectively motivated actors to engage in Orthodox Christianity and mixed martial arts. While the content of these accounts differs in several respects, the processes by which talk about action at one point in space and time served to motivate action at another are strikingly similar. In the first section, we analyze accounts that connected present actions with events and identities from our subjects' pasts, leading them to reinterpret engaging in religious and fighting actions as shedding new light on things both present and lacking in their previous lives. In the second, we look at accounts that connected present religious and fighting experiences with other actions in the present, leading our subjects to view their new pursuits as providing insight far beyond the pews or the mats. Finally, we document accounts that interpretively linked actors' present religious and fighting actions to potential future states of being, suggesting to our subjects that continuation in the practice would lead to a more physically, morally, and/or spiritually advanced self. In each case, we demonstrate how and when accounts worked to hook actors' experiences with religion and fighting to elements of their biographies, helping to subjectively propel action forward by indexing their practices to a motivational project of self-understanding and identity (re)construction.

For reasons of analytic depth as well as constrained space, we focus the bulk of our analysis on representative cases from each site.

Where you were always meant to be: Accounts linking present and past

Members of both the churches and the gyms often invoked their pasts as ways to explain what motivated their current practices. These accounts were just as, if not more, common among veterans of the scene. However, following newcomers as they overcome initial hesitations and build their commitments to the practices offers insight into the process by which members came to see the gym or church as shedding new light on their pasts and providing something that had been previously lacking. Here we follow Danielle, a 48-year-old artist, and Matt, a 28-year-old high school chemistry teacher, as their respective accounts take form.

Before becoming an Eastern Orthodox Christian at the age of 48, Danielle had spent most of her adult years involved in New Age Spirituality and then later as a committed Buddhist. In her early 40s, however, Danielle became what she described as “burned out” on Buddhism and religion altogether. Only after discovering the Orthodox Church, she relayed in an interview shortly after her chrismation,¹ did Danielle “find my spiritual home, where I really belonged” and “who God was leading me to be all this time.”

Danielle’s explanation of her conversion as a moment of profound self-discovery, of finding out where she really belonged and who she was always meant to be, was an extremely common theme within the conversion narratives of Eastern Orthodox Christian converts. In accounts such as these, the motivation for converting was explained by a deep Orthodox unconscious that had been guiding the quest for a previously unknown Orthodox Church all along. In this vocabulary of motive, a deep desire to become an Orthodox Christian was always already there (just not yet explicitly recognized).

With regard to the MMA case, while Matt’s history did not include an overt search for religious meaning, his account of “finding exactly what I didn’t realize I needed” in the MMA gym bears a striking resemblance to Danielle’s. Matt would often speak of how he had sunk into a state of repetition, boredom, and disconnect over the last few years. His initial excitement about achieving his goal of being a teacher had been forced out of him by a “steady diet of bureaucracy and grading.” And while Matt had numerous “work place friendships,” few went beyond perfunctory greetings and wearisome complaints about state requirements and misbehaving kids. As with other members of the site, the MMA gym provided Matt the community and purpose he did not know he was looking for. In finding a “home,” he discovered a spark that he did not even know was gone:

As Ted [the gym owner] likes to say, I was “sleepwalking through life.” I had energy; I just never turned it on. Now I’m training 6-hours a week. . . . It was all pent up. I didn’t even know it . . . I used to just lay in bed at night not being able to turn my mind off. Now when I sleep, I really sleep.

However, these accounts of finding a perfect fit, whether between the Orthodox Church and one’s deep Orthodox unconscious or the MMA gym and unmet corporeal and social needs, were common only after a prolonged engagement with the respective communities. Among newcomers, initial engagements with the actions that comprised Orthodox Christianity and MMA were characterized by hesitancy and ambivalence. In particular, the ornate liturgies and ascetic practices (e.g., fasting) of the church and the close physical contact and pain of the gym forced inquirers to ask if these kinds of activities were truly for them.

When the first author initially observed Danielle at her first liturgy at a local church, for example, she did not appear to be feeling at home. Like most newcomers, Danielle stood in the back of the room acting more as a spectator to—rather than participant in—the liturgy. Throughout the two-hour Sunday ritual, the author observed Danielle regularly lifting one leg and then the other as they would tire and ache from standing for so long. At one point, Danielle even had to quickly move out of the way of the priest as he swung a canister of incense during a liturgical procession. At this point in time, her relationship to Orthodox ritual space and action seemed far from a perfect fit.

After the liturgy, when the author struck up a conversation with Danielle, she herself admitted as much: “Well, it was very interesting,” she answered, referring to the ritual, “but I have to admit I was kind of lost.” When asked what brought her to the church that day, Danielle replied that she had not been to a Christian church since she was a child and while she wasn’t much interested in belonging to a Christian community, she thought she should at least visit an Eastern Orthodox church because she had never been to one before: “I thought I should give it a try before writing off Christianity completely!”

Matt’s entrance into the MMA gym was no more graceful. On the first day, he faced many of the difficulties that first-time MMA participants experience. He looked uncertain on the way to the changing area, apologizing for not having “the right” gear, and nervously moved between stretches he saw other participants doing as he waited for the session to begin. However, as with other newcomers, it was the drilling of different grappling and submission movements that offered the greatest barrier to entry. Matt was notably hesitant to touch his training partners, including the second author. When asked about this later, he laughingly explained it was due to his lack of experience being in “such close contact with sweaty men.” When the class shifted over to light sparring, Matt chose to observe, saying he wasn’t ready to hit someone yet. Instead he sat on the side, switching between watching the rest of the group work striking combinations, rubbing his throat where he had recently been choked, and inspecting his elbows, now raw from mat burns.

Again, much like Danielle, Matt did not seem to have a clear vision of what he was doing there and articulated ambiguous motives for why he had chosen to set foot in the door. When the second author sat beside Matt as the more serious sparring began, he explained, “I must have driven by this place 200 times and thought about stopping 100 times.” He said he thought he would be out of place and there would be “a lot more blood and tattoos . . . I thought I would walk in and it would be like in the movies where the record just stops and everyone looks.” When asked what finally brought him in, he seemed initially stumped, “I guess the more bored I got, the slower I would drive by. I felt like a creep—driving by [he leans back and down as if hiding behind a steering wheel], watching guys head in. Then one day I just did it.”

Like many newcomers, Danielle and Matt’s later accounts of finding a preternatural fit with their new communities seemed quite out of step with their initial speech and behavior. If anything, the observational evidence suggests newcomers’ motives were mixed and ambiguous. Like Danielle and Matt, many were “checking things out,” “just curious,” or “testing the waters.” From a traditional accounts or vocabulary of motives perspective, such discrepancies between initial behaviors and later speech would immediately lead to skepticism as to whether their subsequent accounts were trustworthy reflections of the motives underlying the acts themselves. However, as argued previously, such a purely representational and time-bound view of accounting practices (i.e., Do they accurately reflect the earlier attitudes and behaviors or not?) overlooks the constitutive power of accounts to define, sharpen, and even transform motives over time. In what follows, we examine how the process of retrospectively accounting for what is subjectively driving one’s behavior at time one

(casually visiting a new church or MMA gym) may actually generate clearer and stronger motives for sustaining a line of action up to and beyond time two (becoming a committed Christian or fighter).

In the Eastern Orthodox case, Danielle—with the aid and encouragement of already established members of the community—began the process of developing a new account for her initial visit to the Eastern Orthodox church quite early on. A week after her initial visit, Danielle was back at church and much more engaged. She held a small pamphlet that helped new visitors follow along with the liturgy and made an effort to keep up with the ritual event, reading aloud specific bible verses and creedal statements, singing along with some of the hymns, even making the sign of the cross at times.

At the coffee hour following liturgy, the first author chatted with Danielle, joking that all the incense must not have driven her away after all. Danielle admitted while she was still not crazy about the incense, she “had a very interesting conversation” with the church priest, Father Peter, at coffee hour last week. During that conversation, Danielle told Father Peter she had spent most of her adult life as a practicing Buddhist, which probably put her a long way from Eastern Christianity. But the priest had replied that the distance between the two traditions was not as far as she might think. He explained to Danielle that Buddhism and Eastern Orthodoxy actually have significant similarities in that they share a mystic, experiential mindset and a strong contemplative tradition. “There is great spiritual truth in the Buddha’s teachings,” Father Peter interjected, reaffirming what he had told Danielle a week earlier, “particularly about human desire. . . . Eastern Orthodoxy also has a strong focus on asceticism and the transcendence of desire.”

“Isn’t that so interesting?,” Danielle asked the author, looking genuinely enthusiastic. Danielle also said she learned from other members of the parish that Eastern Christianity had something similar to meditation within its tradition. At that point, Father Peter chimed in with the appropriate terminology: *hesychasm*, or the Orthodox mystical tradition of ceaseless prayer centering around the repeated ritual utterance of the Jesus Prayer. When Danielle discussed these similarities with the priest and others the previous week, she told the author, “I had to come back and learn more about what’s going on here!”

Matt’s immersion into gym culture bears much in common with Danielle’s process of finding new connections to the practice and justifications for participation. In the weeks that followed Matt’s initial entry, the second author noticed he spent a great deal of time eagerly absorbing both fighting techniques and stories from Keith, a young patent lawyer. During open training, Matt was no longer so hesitant and often found his way to rolling with him, laughing and expressing frustration after Keith submitted him, and expressing gratitude as he explained technique. When the author commented that the more veteran gym member seemed to have taken Matt under his wing, Matt talked both of Keith’s skills on the mats and his outlook on the world: “Maybe it is because he comes from a physics background . . . he is so committed to breaking down every detail. He never just does something. He always needs to know why and how.” When the author followed up asking what he admires about it, Matt’s answer revealed how Keith had helped him understand some of the elements lacking in his life that pushed him through the doors of the gym, in particular, the absence of passion for a craft and curiosity:

It [Keith’s approach to MMA] is almost spiritual. I don’t think it is. You can’t help but admire that kind of commitment to something. . . . I didn’t have that for anything. I think that is why he is so good. Because he never gets bored with it. And you can see it every day. Yesterday he spent an hour playing around with just his hand position on

a choke! Literally, an hour. He is a scientist! That is the scientific method right there . . . I need to get my eighth graders in here!

Here we observe how accounts created interpretive linkages that suggest a narrative path to the practice. In the church, Father Peter and others drew a plotline between Danielle's religious past as a Buddhist and her current quasi-interest in the Orthodox Church. This narrative alignment between past experience and present action effectively hooked Danielle's interest and seemed to motivate her to return—"I had to come back and learn more," as she put it. And in the gym, other fighters helped Matt connect what was happening on the mat to both his preexisting understandings of himself as a "man of science" and new understandings of what was previously lacking in his life—true friends and a craft to pursue.

To be clear, this process of casting interpretive hooks between Eastern Orthodoxy/MMA and potential newcomers' pasts was not only confined to Danielle and Matt's cases. It was a ubiquitous feature of discourse surrounding entry into all the religious and fighting communities we studied (see Green 2016; Winchester 2015). In such instances, others in the community suggested to the newcomer there might be something more, something "deeper" to their interest in Eastern Orthodoxy or MMA than initially perceived. From our hermeneutic perspective, what is important here is not whether these post hoc explanations of a deeper, unconscious motive accurately reflected a preexisting Orthodox or fighting subconscious but how such accounts encouraged this self-understanding within the actors themselves. In persuading them that their new practices did indeed have some kind of deep continuity with preexisting predilections and desires, the accounts cast by the community held out the possibility these novel activities held some kind of interpretive key to their pasts, leading to moments of self-discovery of which they were previously unaware.

It is important to stress here that to successfully begin the process of hooking these actions to actors' self-narratives, not just any motive account would do. Returning to our pragmatist understanding of motivation as relational, the proffered account had to successfully resonate or hook up with some aspect of the actor's biography and self-understanding. For example, while in Danielle's case (and in other cases where actors had previous experience with "Eastern" religions) Father Peter's account suggested a connection based on her previous interests in mysticism and contemplation, in others, the author observed members of the community emphasizing accounts that aligned more with the background of the particular newcomer.² This process of utilizing an account based on perceived fit with aspects of the individual's biography involved some level of educated guesswork and trial and error. It was also one in which newcomers could take an active role. In the same conversation in which he discussed his connection with Keith, for example, MMA newcomer Matt also demonstrated how participants could "filter out" accounts that did not mesh with their narratives. Matt explained:

You know, I'm a chemist, so I can see through lot of the spiritual stuff that Jonah [a fighter with a penchant for telling complicated stories drawing on disparate types of knowledge] says. I mean, some of it is really interesting but some it is based on these interpretations of science that are just wrong. It is really cool how he connects fighting to all these cosmic processes, but sometimes I have trouble not being the jerk, [goes into a nasally "nerd voice"] "well actually, that isn't how sub-atomic particles work."

In aligning with Keith's science-based talk over Jonah's spiritual discussions, Matt rejected engagement with an account that offered little motivational resonance with his self-concept. The diversity of accounts in these settings demonstrates that while there were many

acceptable ways actors could hypothetically justify their participation in light of community norms, individuals were drawn to the account they perceived to align with their self-understandings. As hermeneutic hooks, many accounts could be cast out, but not all would necessarily catch the interest of actors.

While at earlier stages newcomers were being talked into the action by others, later on, the authors observed how many of these same religious and martial arts neophytes began to internalize and build on these accounts themselves, more deeply embedding their new actions into narratives of past identities. Approximately two months after their initial entries, both Matt and Danielle demonstrated the manner in which the motive accounts had begun to take hold. Matt had begun a more detailed unearthing of past experiences that foreshadowed his newfound love of fighting. Along with the previous themes of boredom and lack of purpose, Matt now incorporated stories of early encounters with fighting through movies and video games. Perhaps even more importantly, Matt now told the second author of times where he had shied away from physical confrontation in high school and college. When the first author conversed with Danielle again, she explained how she had been practicing the Jesus Prayer and that it had “opened up something in me that I haven’t experienced in years . . . a very transcendent, spiritual feeling.” Danielle told the author she used to get this type of feeling with Buddhist meditation but now “also with this strong feeling of great love and acceptance.” At this point, Danielle said, “there is a reason that I found the Church; I think this is where God has been leading me all along.”

A few months later still, Matt’s adoption of the accounts could be seen as he began to perform the role of teaching newcomers how to account for their participation, encouraging them to interpretively hook their present actions into their narrative pasts. When the second author returned to the gym after a short break from the field, he found Matt helping initiate a new member. As Matt showed the basics of applying a triangle-choke, he simultaneously explained how MMA had helped him not just learn how to fight but realize how he had lost his passion for life, his drive to improve, and an honest form of connection to other people before discovering the mats.

Again, from a traditional accounts perspective, the discrepancy between the ambivalent speech and behavior when an actor entered the gym or the church and the fully formed retrospective accounts of motives we see here would be viewed as evidence of the decoupling of motive talk from motivated action, intersubjective string from subjective spring. In terms of explaining what propelled our Eastern Orthodox and MMA neophytes from casual visitors to committed converts, talk did not appear to accurately reflect the initial actions to which it ostensibly referred or the subjective states underlying them. What we have aimed to show here, however, is how this perspective misses how accounts link actions to ongoing processes of self-interpretation, making the actions part of a project of self-discovery that can itself become a strong motivator for—and thus also important sociological explanation of—further action.

It’s about life: Accounts linking actions and identities in the present

In both churches and gyms, we observed a second form of accounting that, instead of connecting religious and MMA practices to past lives, aimed to interpretively hook them to actions and identities in the present. As newcomers learned to grapple and strike or fast and pray, they also quickly learned how these behaviors were always about something more than just learning how to escape a painful armlock or deal with a grumbling stomach during Lent. Each site was rich with accounts that suggested connections between MMA and Orthodox religious actions and other aspects of actors’ current lives and selves—revealing significant

truths about both. As in the previous section, we found the casting out and subsequent adoption of these accounts to be important explanations for what motivated newcomers to continue to engage in practices about which they were initially unsure, ambivalent, or troubled.

In the Orthodox case, ritual fasting was usually the action in which newcomers appeared least motivated to participate, at least initially. Orthodox fasting generally involves abstaining from meat, dairy, oil, and alcohol and greatly reducing food intake. In addition, most fasting periods or “seasons” in the Orthodox Church are quite lengthy, ranging from the two-week Dormition Fast in August to the seven-week Lenten or “Great” Fast before Pascha (i.e., Easter). These strict rules and the extended length of fasting seasons struck newcomers as particularly daunting, even draconian. Several predicted this might be what ended their inquiries into Eastern Orthodoxy. As a new inquirer, Jeremy, told me, “I’m intrigued [by Eastern Orthodoxy], but I think once it comes to the fasting, I’ll be out of here.” Or as Abby, who later converted with her husband Jacob told me, “the fasting was a big obstacle to our committing at first. It just seemed . . . to be over-the-top and rigid. We thought, ‘Why does God care at all what you eat?’”

Moreover, newcomers’ initial experiences with fasting could prove quite frustrating. Eastern Orthodox inquirers often talked about feeling like failures when first participating in a fast as they found themselves unconsciously breaking the rules in the course of trying to abruptly change ingrained eating habits. The body’s tendency to act first and ask questions later created numerous situations in which eating habits outpaced reflective awareness, only to be consciously “caught” a moment later. As one individual put it, “You find yourself reaching for that beer at the end of the day or unwrapping that candy bar in the afternoon and going, ‘Whoa, wait a minute, what I am doing here?’” In addition, prolonged fasting would invariably lead to physiological and psychological disruptions such as hunger pangs, strong cravings, and feelings of irritability and moodiness that could make everyday routines and relationships problematic. From this perspective, it is little wonder newcomers initially experienced fasting as a motivational obstacle to continued action.

In the MMA gym, perhaps unsurprisingly, ever-present pain and physical contact offered the greatest obstacles to entry. It is safe to assume most people who entered the gym expected the obvious sources of pain—getting kicked in your leg or punched in the nose hurts. However, what surprised people is how long the pain lasts and how when someone first started training, it *all* hurts (see Green 2011). Many newcomers expressed shock at how unforgiving the mats were and how scraping along the rubber surface left the flesh burned and raw. Even the seemingly nonviolent parts of training involved a degree of contact rarely encountered outside of the gym as partners practiced chokes, joint-locks, and positional control on each other. This intense physicality led some newcomers (even those with a strong background in athletics) to drop out after a brief engagement. Kristin, a recent college graduate, captured this well when talking about bringing a few teammates from her soccer team to the gym. They had expressed interest after she came home “with my arms and legs all bruised and with my knuckles bleeding from working the heavy bag.” However, their initial confidence and proclaimed toughness quickly vanished—“it was just too much contact. . . . They didn’t know what they were getting into.” Laughing, she concluded none of her friends made it past two weeks.

Much like the recent religious convert doubting their mettle after struggling to resist a cold beer or perfectly cooked steak, hesitations to be hurt or hurt another led to questions about whether someone was cut out to be a fighter. Chris, a successful local musician, reflected back on how his days in the gym almost came to an end the first time he got into the “cage” to spar another member of the site. He described the experience as “eye-opening”

and “ugly.” He had been practicing grappling and striking for over a month but quickly found himself afraid to get hit and even more afraid to hit his sparring partner. “I felt like a failure. . . . Mark [the trainer/cage fighter] was screaming at me to throw the combinations I had been working on. . . . I was frozen.” For others, it was discovering how pain followed them from the gym to all areas of their life. For example, Steve, a burly physical education teacher, shared that all of his talk of MMA being good for his body was less convincing when he was not able to help his wife with gardening due to elbow and shoulder damage.

However, participants in both sites would later come to experience these difficulties as something they appreciated and even looked forward to with anticipation. For converts, this surprising transformation happened as they learned to account for their frustrating fasting experiences in new ways, explaining their failures to follow the rules, strong cravings, or tendencies to be irritable as consequences not just of the current condition of their bodies but also of their souls. A first-time faster named Beth illustrated this shift in perspective quite well when she started to account for her repeated failures to keep the fasting rules:

So many times now, I’ve found myself mindlessly breaking it [the fast]. Just unthinkingly eating stuff that I’ve already told myself I’m not supposed to eat! . . . And then I begin to wonder, how often does that happen with sin? How often do I just act on a sinful desire without even thinking about it? . . . I wasn’t keen on fasting at first, but now I understand what it does. It’s just like what Father Andrew [her priest] says, it’s this really profound way to learn about your spiritual situation, the things that are tripping you up and keeping you from God.

What is interesting here is newcomers like Beth became hooked by accounts that explained fasting “failures” as moments of deep self-insight. Through such accounts, bodily experiences related to appetite, hunger, and food became interpretively linked to one’s present moral and spiritual condition, serving as metaphors for behaviors and inclinations that extended well beyond those related to food. The fasting body, then, could be experienced as a window into the previously opaque workings of one’s soul. And while newcomers may not have liked what they initially perceived, accounting for fasting as a deeply ethical and spiritual form of self-knowledge motivated them to come back to the practice. As a convert named Jeremy explained:

When I was first learning about the Church, people would say, “Oh, I really look forward to the fasts!” And I’m like, “Sure you do.” You know, “that’s what you tell all the new converts, right?” [laughing] . . . But I get it now, because it’s not even really about being hungry, or not just that, I should say. It’s about learning about your passions, your tendencies to sin, and learning about how to discipline and retrain yourself. . . . When you realize that, it makes you want to do it. You’re getting a lot of spiritual insight, self-insight from it, you know?

Similarly, in the MMA gym, we can see the painful exchanges providing an impetus for reflection and meaning-making. Because of the unpleasant qualities of the corporeal experience, members were pushed to account for why they engaged in the action. In the case of pain, the account would often extend outward to find meaning in the present rather than looking backward to past experiences or imagining future trajectories. Most immediately, the pain was reinterpreted as evidence that what was being learned in the MMA gym was effective, authentic, and “real.” As Jeff, a 31-year-old computer programmer, explained, one of the first things he heard when entering the gym after years of aikido was ““this is going to

hurt' . . . they weren't wrong." Similar to the experience of athletes participating in physically demanding endurance sports (Atkinson 2008), the pain was reinterpreted as proof Jeff was testing his limits and "doing something." In this sense, the account was able to transform the most difficult moments into something to be sought after.

The Promise of a Better You: Accounts, Imagined Futures, and the Construction of Anticipation

In the third type of accounting we observed, we found Orthodox Christians and MMA fighters engaging in forms of motive talk that interpretively linked their present actions to anticipated future states of being. In these instances, actors would be introduced to accounts that suggested religious or martial arts practices undertaken in the here and now were ultimately leading them to some version of a more enlightened and desirable self. Such discourses hooked present practices to a future-oriented process of self-improvement, charging present actions with future potential that motivated actors toward continued engagement.

In the Eastern Orthodox case, individuals learned they should establish and keep a prayer rule as part of their daily lives. While some of those who were familiar with the practice of ritual prayer from their previous religious traditions (e.g., Roman Catholicism) engaged in such prayers with enthusiasm, many others were reluctant. This was especially the case for those individuals coming from an Evangelical Christian background, a tradition that emphasizes a much more spontaneous and conversational style of prayer in which the praying subject simply "talks to God" whenever and wherever the need arises (Winchester and Guhin 2019). A formerly Evangelical woman named Christine, for example, told two new inquirers she initially struggled with keeping a prayer rule. Growing up in an Evangelical church, she was used to "just saying what's on my heart whenever the need [for prayer] arises," and so reciting what were in many cases centuries-old prayers written by other people at set times during the day proved both uncomfortable and difficult. Christine confided that she used to skip her prayers due to both forgetfulness and lack of motivation.

In the MMA gym, participants faced challenges that seemingly existed on far ends of a spectrum. Some days required repetitive drilling of the same move with attention being paid to each small detail of the positioning and transitions. This would involve a combination of the painful and the monotonous (e.g., having a choke or joint-lock applied over and over by a training partner). Other days, participants engaged in intense conditioning drills where they were pushed past the point of exhaustion as they worked their way through a circuit of MMA-related exercises or engaged in round after round of sparring or grappling until the mat was covered in puddles of sweat. As Jeff explained, after a long work week, it could be difficult to muster the motivation and concentration for the former and energy and courage for the latter: "Don't underestimate the grip strength of the couch! Some nights that thing won't let you go." Dan, a young banker, added, "When everyone is going out for happy hour after work it is hard to be like, 'sorry, I have to go work on my armbar escape.'"

In both cases, guidance was offered by respected voices in the scene, and new motivations were cultivated through accounts that oriented the participants toward future goals or ends in view. Orthodox clergy and more seasoned parishioners in the communities, for example, were well aware of converts' antipathy toward ritualized prayer and relied on accounts to justify the action. One of the most common accounts justified keeping a set prayer rule as a type of spiritual exercise for the strength of the soul, analogous to the importance of physical training for the body. As one priest explained following a bible study:

As [Eastern Orthodox] Christians, we keep a prayer rule for the same reason we should keep a physical exercise regimen. If we want to maintain a strong and healthy body, we have to engage in regular, disciplined physical training. By the same token, if we want to maintain a strong and healthy soul, we have to engage in regular, disciplined spiritual training. Prayer strengthens the inner, spiritual life, just as surely as push-ups or sit-ups strengthen the outer, physical life.

Moreover, just as training through bodily exercise develops new physical capabilities, training through prayer was said to develop novel or improved spiritual capacities. According to Eastern Orthodox tradition, the saints developed their prayer lives to such an extent they learned to pray without ceasing—namely, prayer had become so ingrained in them that they were constantly praying, internally, all the time.

The idea that a prayer rule was akin to dedicated spiritual exercise or training struck a chord of recognition with many converts, including the initially reluctant Christine, who had a background in high school and collegiate athletics. As she told the author:

A big change in my thinking about [having a prayer rule] was after a conversation I had with Father Mark. . . . [H]e asked me, “Do the top athletes only practice when they feel like it?” And I was like, “No.” And so he asked, “Why not?” And I said, well, of course it’s because to be the best player on the field or court or whatever, you have to train on a regular basis regardless of whether you feel like it. And he was like, “Bingo.” That’s the way it works with spirituality too. . . . So that really helped me think about it in a new way. . . . This is something I’m doing not just for today but for my long-term benefit, to improve myself spiritually. So even if I don’t feel like doing it today, I do it because it will pay off down the road.

While physical training and athletic accomplishment provided a powerful metaphor in the Orthodox Church, recent MMA converts embraced the pursuit of corporeal improvement as both an end in itself *and* a long-term path to self-improvement. Much of the motivating talk came in the form of future-oriented clichés that could be found in other sports spaces and provided the necessary boost to get people through the workout/sparring session: “the pain is peeling off the layers of weakness . . . getting to a true or better self,” “facing down your demons day after day,” and Zach’s, a local fighter, favorite during sparring day, “When we are in here, *they* are sitting at home. *They* took off that final round. *We* don’t take off rounds.”

For many in the site, these seemingly clichéd accounts hooked monotonous actions in the present to a superior version of the future self that extended beyond their time in the gym. Erik, a 27-year-old part-time carpenter, came to see cage fighting as his calling even as he acknowledged it was not likely to lead to a sustainable source of income. In discussing his time recovering from a severe knee injury that required surgery and kept him off the mats for over a year, Erik explained:

People would always ask me, “What is plan B”? They would act like I was crazy when I told them that it doesn’t matter. I’m probably not going to get rich fighting . . . I’m not dumb. But, with what I’m learning I’m confident I can succeed at anything . . . I’m losing my weakness. I’m losing my ego. It is all getting chipped away. After being in that cage! I’m not scared of a little adversity. . . . I don’t care what I do. I know what I am. . . . All that forged steel shit [referring to a common phrase in the gym] is kind of true. I’m going to keep getting sharper.

What is significant here is not just that the sports/physical training analogies in the church or the motivational talk in the gym provided after-the-fact justifications for the practice or even that it gave a different, more positive spin on challenging activities. More important for the purposes of our argument is that the discursive account became hooked into their own interpretations of the action, connecting current prayer and training practices to an anticipated future state of being in which they would be more spiritually advanced (cf. Frye 2012; Johnston 2016).

In sociological terms, ritual prayer and MMA training protocols became part and parcel of new “imagined futures” as present actions were interpretively linked with potential future selves (Mische 2009:698). And, as in previous sections, while newcomers were initially “talked into the action” by others, later these same practitioners internalized and built on these accounts themselves, more deeply indexing their new actions to narratives of desirable futures. As a result, the anticipation of future improvement subjectively motivated action in the present, even in instances where, to quote Christine or countless MMA hobbyists facing a difficult strength and conditioning circuit or day of sparring, “I don’t feel like doing it today.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Taking inspiration from hermeneutic perspectives on self-identity as well as pragmatist conceptualizations of the temporality of action and experience, we have argued accounts significantly influence motivation when they interpretively connect or hook actors’ present actions with aspects of their self-narratives—namely, their past, present, and/or future self-understandings. Drawing on ethnographic case studies of actors’ involvements in Eastern Orthodoxy and mixed martial arts, we demonstrated common processes by which accounts helped integrate actors’ fighting and religious actions into highly motivational projects of self-development and self-discovery. While decades of previous sociological scholarship on motive talk has placed analytic focus on how actors’ accounts index the normative constraints of social contexts *as opposed to* subjective motivations, our perspective has aimed to highlight how this is a false dichotomy. Accounts can be invaluable for explaining what sustains motivation for a course of action, particularly in the face of feelings of ambivalence, doubt, or routinization.

As scholars such as Campbell (1996), Vaisey (2009, 2010), and Smith (2015) have noted, longstanding sociological debates about the relationship between accounts and motivation are also deeply embedded within and reflective of different theoretical assumptions about how culture in general works to shape human subjectivity and action. With this in mind, we suggest how our findings speak to—and may ultimately help bridge—two interrelated theoretical divides in cultural sociology: (1) the role of automatic versus discursive cognition in the culture-action relationship and (2) the means/ends or justification/motivation split in contemporary cultural sociology.

This research provides an important corrective and complement to sociological theories of action that have emphasized automatic cognitive associations and nondiscursive dispositions when it comes to explaining what subjectively organizes and motivates action (e.g., Bourdieu 1990; Martin 2010, 2011; Vaisey 2008, 2009; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). Like us, dual-process theorists have been critical of sociological approaches that abandon the question of motivation altogether. However, they tend to share the assumption that actors’ motive accounts are post hoc rationalizations for action that are only loosely coupled—if at all—to the underlying desires and intentions that propel action forward.

While we agree with these theorists that action is often strongly motivated by subconscious habits and cognitive schemas resistant to discursive articulation, the one-to-one association of culture's motivational role with habitus/automatic cognition ultimately hinders investigation into how discursive consciousness and accounts also play important (and ultimately complementary) motivational roles. Our findings suggest accounts are most significant for influencing motivation at precisely those times when significant aspects of actors' habitual dispositions/automatic cognitive processes become problematized. Our research also suggests such moments of problematization are relatively common, occurring at several stages within the social career. Upon moments of entry into a new field of practice, for example, many people may initially approach the action with feelings of ambivalence and trepidation, a mixture of both curiosity/attraction and wariness/repulsion. After initial entry and involvement, actors encounter plenty of moments of discomfort and displacement as old habits and cognitive associations are reconstructed in line with the demands of the new practice, whether that reconstructive process involves prolonged periods of fasting, fisticuffs, or something else entirely. These moments are usually what initiate the development of accounts and the concomitant process of identity exploration and reconstruction. The excitement generated by this self-interpretive process may be strong enough to motivate actors to sustain lines of action even in the face of dispositional ambivalence. Indeed, such accounts and the anticipation of future moments of self-discovery may carry an actor through periods of dispositional misalignment until they develop and solidify the elements of their habitus that are out of place.

However, our research also highlights there are instances where even developing the requisite habitus may not always in and of itself be enough to sustain motivation. Previous research has shown prolonged habituation into a new set of activities may actually lead to periods of decreased motivation as actors burn out and lose the desire that led them to engage in the action (see Tavory and Winchester 2012). Indeed, we found instances where seasoned and well-habituated members had to be talked into the action—namely, provided with accounts for why they should desire to practice the same prayer rule or training routine they had been doing for months or even years on end. New accounts added new layers of meaning to the “same old” action, encouraging even old-timers that there was still something in it for (and about) them. In sum, our research suggests accounts become invaluable for sociological explanations of motivation at precisely those moments in time when it is phenomenologically weak, unclear, and ambiguous—namely, when actors are trying to understand and work through their own muddled and muddled desires for sustaining a course of action.

Conversely, while dispositional theories of action can be criticized for not taking the narrative dimension of subjectivity into full account, hermeneutic theorists of the self can in turn be critiqued for assuming actors' self-interpretations matter for what they do but not being sufficiently concerned with how and when. This research also extends hermeneutic perspectives on subjectivity by highlighting the intricate sequencing of narrative selves and social actions, drawing attention to when narrative self-understandings matter for sustaining a course of action and how these understandings are solicited and even in part transformed through motive accounts.

This article also speaks to what various scholars have highlighted as a means/ends or justification/motivation split within parts of contemporary cultural sociology (Friedland and Mohr 2004; Frye 2012; Kaufman 2004; Vaisey 2009, 2010). While earlier, Parsonian theories conceptualized culture as shaping action by instilling deeply internalized values that motivate actors to pursue particular ends, theories following the more contemporary “cultural turn” in American sociology have largely replaced this view with one that sees culture as providing the publicly available, symbolic means through which actors make sense of and

justify their actions (most notably in Swidler-inspired repertoire or toolkit approaches). This turn toward “culture as means” offers an important criticism of models that view culture strictly in terms of internalized values and motivations. However, simply reversing the dualism evacuates questions of subjectivity from cultural analysis and leaves the question of what motivates people to pursue, commit to, and stick with lines of action vague and underdetermined (Kaufman 2004; Vaisey 2008).

While Vaisey’s (2009) previously mentioned dual-process model attempts to bridge this division by grounding culture’s motivational and justificatory roles within two different cognitive systems, our research suggests—in line with pragmatist insights (Dewey 1922; Frye 2012; Whitford 2002)—rejecting a stark dichotomy between justifications/means versus motivation/ends is a more tenable way forward. Dewey (1922) claimed there was no strong division between ends and means and that the two were in fact reciprocally related. Within a particular course of action, what was initially a means for action at time one can quickly become an end of one’s action at time two, which then can act as a means for further action at time three, and so on. Post hoc justifications for an action undertaken at one point in time, in other words, can transform into sincere motivations for undertaking that same action at another. In our cases, after-the-fact accounts of why actors were engaging in the action began as justifications that were likely only loosely coupled with what was initially motivating the action, as traditional theorists of accounts would predict. But these initial *ex post facto* justifications were just the start of a more temporally extended interpretive process of linking the new actions and experiences with existing self-understandings. As actors began to identify new religious or martial arts practices as part of a larger narrative of self-discovery and self-improvement, what were once “disconnected” justifications or accounts became constitutive of motivations for further action.

A final general point here is while action and commentary on action may appear disjointed if we only attend to a very short sequence of (inter)action, if we take a longer view, we may find action and accounts can become tightly woven together into temporally extended social career trajectories. Our research found it was precisely the work of accounting for the practices comprising Eastern Orthodoxy and MMA training that made them about more than prayers and fasts or roundkicks and kneebars. While such embodied actions and experiences were central to each social career, these aspects alone did not constitute the entirety of their cultural form or meaning. Motive accounts extended and expanded the meaning of a rumbling stomach or a bruised rib into new cultural terrain—namely, it’s not only about fasts or fists; it’s also about your life and who you are. While sociologists have sometimes been dismissive of reflexive self-concepts and self-narratives as so many “biographical illusions” (Bourdieu 2000), we argue attending to how actors interpret their actions as implicated in their own self-narratives and life “projects” (Mische 2009; Schutz 1967) is vitally important for explaining what sustains motivation within particular career trajectories.

This study also opens avenues for further research. While we have analyzed cases of religious and sporting careers specifically here, we hope our more general claims about how and when accounts influence motivation will be usefully applied to (and evaluated against) empirical research on other social careers, for example, marriage, parenthood, professions and occupations, criminality, schooling, military service, physical and/or psychological rehabilitation, and so on. While habituated dispositions, routines, and normative expectations certainly propel action forward in many moments within such careers, there are also likely important instances where habits and expectations become problematized and where people reflect on and question their own motivations for continuing on (with that same relationship, that half-finished book manuscript, that next month of therapy sessions, etc.). The

temporal patterning of these moments, the role accounts may play in motivating actors to move beyond them, and the kinds of self-narratives that emerge from these interactions are fruitful areas for future comparative inquiry.

Additionally, while we have focused on processes by which accounts *successfully* motivated actors to continue with their practices, future scholarship is needed on the converse question—when do accounts *fail* to do this work? This research suggests two important factors likely to contribute to such failure: (1) the contents of the motive accounts developed within a given community do not resonate with elements of an actor's self-narrative and/or (2) the otherwise resonant accounts are not deployed at the right moments within the actor's career trajectory (particularly during those times when actors face ambivalence, discomfort, frustration, or some other problematization of their current course of conduct). Future sociologists could develop more carefully controlled comparative studies of stayers and leavers within a given social career, more rigorously testing how, when, and to what extent these (and other) factors influence the likelihood accounts will or will not sustain a course of action.

Future research could also explore whether some accounts contribute to motivation for *exiting* a particular career trajectory. While our case studies attend to the motivational significance of accounts for sustaining a line of action, it stands to reason that accounts may also play an important role in persuading actors to opt out and/or choose alternative careers. Once embedded within a particular social career and community, do actors hear competing accounts—perhaps from family members, friends, or peers outside of the community of practice—which suggest that perhaps another career would in reality be more fulfilling, more in line with who they were, are, and wish to become? Is the current commitment cast as “just a phase” or perhaps a stepping-stone to a different social career path? And how and when might such competing accounts motivate actors to leave one line of action and embark on another? Answers to such questions would stand to make significant contributions not only to understanding motive talk but also role exit (e.g., Ebaugh 1988).

Ultimately, we hope this research serves as encouragement for sociologists to reconsider the motivational significance of accounts, particularly as they pertain to how we understand what moves social actors to keep coming back to the action.

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NOTES

1. The ritual by which one becomes an official member of the Church.
2. It is important to note that these attempts were not cynical but rather based on a sincere belief that Eastern Orthodoxy contained universal truths relevant to people of all backgrounds (see Winchester 2015).

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